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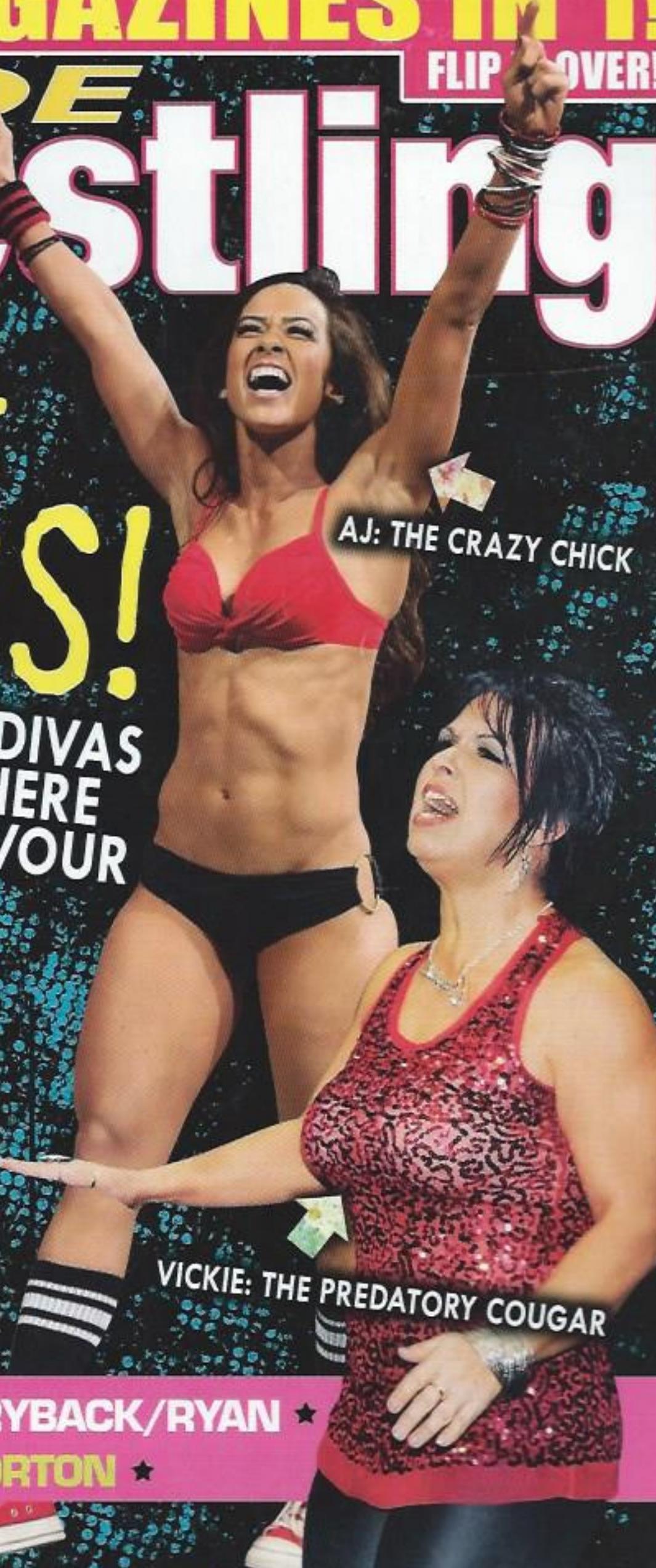
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on the road

With Dave Lenker

THIRTY YEARS AGO, I first stumbled across a bunch of fat men in bathing suits rolling around inside a ring. I don't remember exactly why it held my attention on some wistful Saturday morning as I mindlessly channel surfed. I don't remember the first match I saw, which wrestler captivated me, or any of the other details.

I just remember that soon enough, I was hooked, and soon thereafter, my parents didn't have to ask what I was doing up so early (9 or 10 in the morning for goodness' sake!) on a Saturday. They knew it was "that stupid wrestling."

I'm still following "that stupid wrestling" three decades later, though Monday, Thursday, and Friday nights have replaced Saturday mornings/early evenings.

I guess I'm feeling nostalgic for the days of those poorly lit WWF TV tapings in dingy rundown buildings in Allentown and Hamburg, Pennsylvania. And I've occasionally pondered the kind of question probably all of us whose names have been on the masthead of this magazine for a long time now have pondered at some point: If I were turning 13 years old today and not in 1982, would I become a wrestling fan?

Complicated stuff. A lot has changed that makes me wonder—and there might be a lesson in it for the decision-makers from Vince McMahon on down.

Despite my affinity for the gracefulness of Jimmy "Superfly" Snuka

and his glorious "Superfly" dive in 1982, it wasn't the athleticism that won me over. To this day, I have no problem admitting that I can't break down a match the way a true student of the science like Dan Murphy can. What enthralled me was the outrageousness of it all, the crazy storylines, intense feuds, the over-the-top characters, the unpredictability, and maybe even the fact that it was all too absurd and ridiculous for the masses to embrace. (You're talking about an odd 13-year-old kid/amateur psychologist who spent a lot of time wondering why the hapless preliminary wrestlers who got pummeled week after week kept coming back for more beatings.)

My interest actually faded as McMahon transformed the WWF into a glitzy international juggernaut and "Hulkamania" exploded. Okay, maybe that had to do with other stuff, too, like the fact that girls became a lot more appealing to me around that time.

But the fact that the WWF became so slick and polished did turn me off.

Well, now, here we are more than halfway through 2012, and I'm concerned that WWE has become far too corporate ... and image conscious ... and polished. I know, it comes with the territory when you're a publicly traded entity that must answer to stockholders.

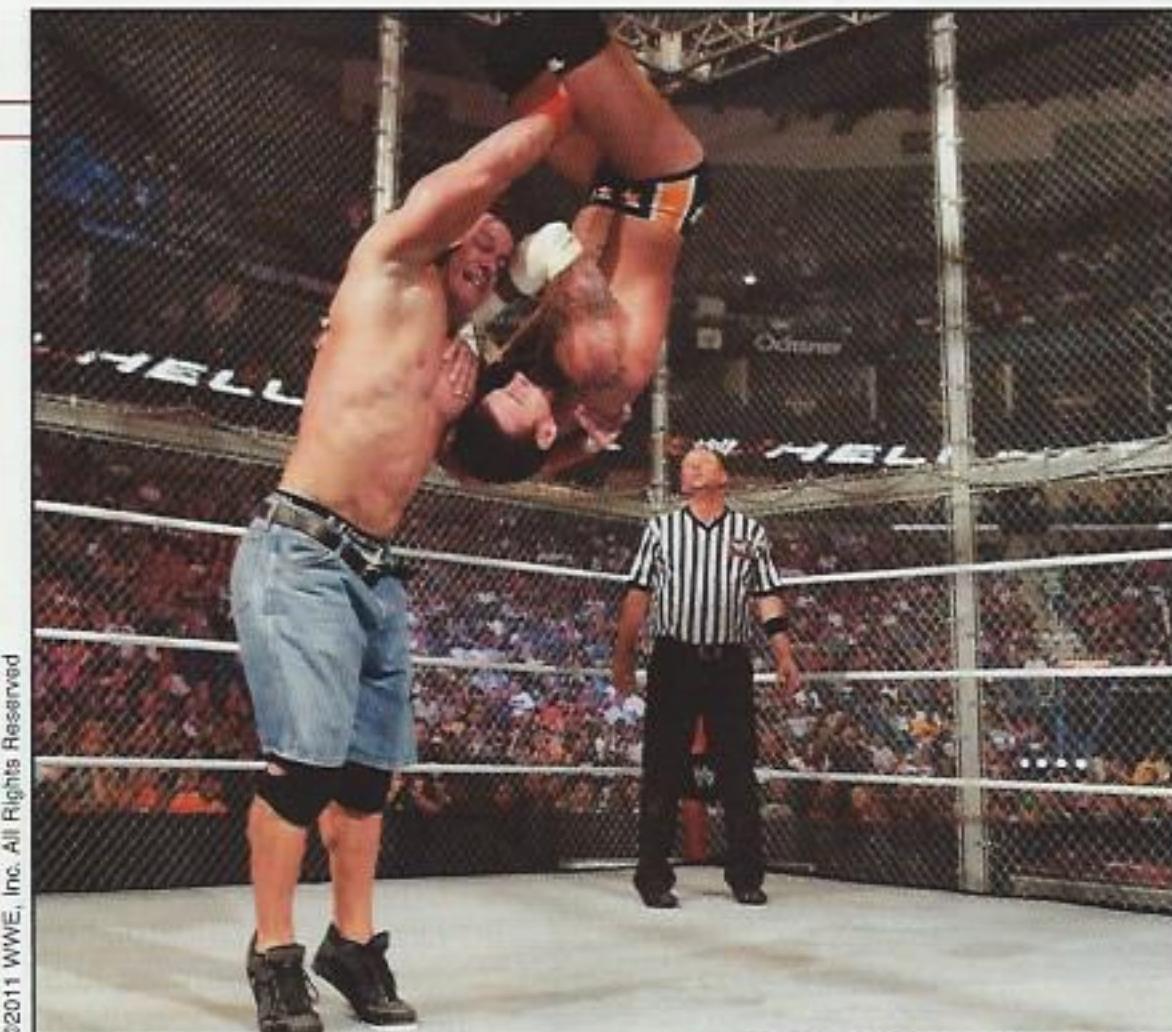
Excuse the rant, as some of this stuff is obvious and has been analyzed *ad nauseam*.

Hell, I even think having a pay-per-view every month is detrimental in some respects. It's clear that too many PPV matches have to be made to fill cards in 2012. Witness this year's No Way Out card, which featured four matches that probably belonged on *Superstars*. A tux-



Photo by George Napolitano

WWE should be commended for its anti-bullying campaign, but, as Dave Lenker notes, isn't bullying the backbone of this sport? Certainly, Brodus Clay has every advantage over John Laurinaitis, who's 14 years his senior.



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Lenker appreciated the John Cena vs. CM Punk Hell in a Cell match last October, but he feels the spontaneity of this specialty match is lost when there is a pay-per-view event that must be filled each year.

edo match? A Ryback squash? A quarter-century ago, it felt like that worked in reverse—that feuds and potential matches became so huge that they needed to be on PPV.

It has gotten even worse in that WWE has put a regular Hell in a Cell pay-per-view on its schedule. Didn't it used to be that every once in a while, a feud got so big that it needed the mother of all steel cages to finish it (say, Triple-H vs. Undertaker at WrestleMania this year)? Now it's all nicely scheduled in advance so that the company *must* conveniently find a match or two for the Cell at a pre-specified time of the year.

It also bugs me these days that WWE fans can't just be fans. We're the WWE Universe. Wrestlers aren't wrestlers. They're Superstars, entertainers, performers. *Raw* and *Smackdown* aren't wrestling shows—they're action/adventure or variety hours.

A couple of years ago, WWE actually fired a hot young star in Daniel Bryan for choking ring announcer Justin Roberts with his tie when the storyline called for Bryan,

a nefarious member of Nexus, to do some pretty dastardly deeds.

Thirty years of watching wrestling, here. It's what bad guys do!

Go way back to 2004 and JBL got into trouble for goose-stepping during a WWE event in Germany. Okay, so this was in violation of German law, and I do find it impossible to defend anything Nazi-related, but still, in principle, it was a gutsy heel tactic that surely would have elicited a deserved beating from his opponent that night.

That sprung back to mind recently because just this spring, Chris Jericho was suspended for 30 days by WWE for defacing the Brazilian flag during a South American house show. Again, there was the problem of the act being illegal in Brazil, but Jericho was just trying to get the crowd to revile him. He's good at that.

Last year, Fit Finlay lost his job as a WWE backstage agent because as the man in charge of a house show, he allowed The Miz to interrupt our national anthem in an effort to antagonize fans. Seems reps from the National Guard who were

there that night didn't take kindly to that. An overreaction if you ask me.

In recent months, WWE has admirably taken a very public stance against bullying. In this and other campaigns, it sends some of its biggest stars, heels and fan favorites (and often together, but don't get me started on that), out into public to speak out against bullying. Again, admirable.

But wait a minute, like jingoism and sneak-attacks and all sorts of despicable tactics, isn't bullying a part of wrestling? Don't we see bullying on every show, and don't we see it from TV and movie characters all the time?

To be ultra-safe, should we change the name of PWI's annual Most Hated Wrestler of the Year award to Most Disagreeable Wrestler of the Year if a WWE wrestler—sorry, Superstar—wins it? Might be the safe and responsible thing to do.

Sometimes WWE's efforts to separate storyline from reality are counterproductive. I think we're seeing sanitization and political correctness to the extreme here, even if the intentions are sometimes good.

Next step: stricter referee enforcement of the closed-fist punch rule. Or maybe we should skip the wrestling part altogether and just have Superstars settle their differences with promos.

I guess my big picture point here is that with all this and with such a strong focus being on who is running the show and lawsuits and the like, we're seeing more and more evidence of WWE moving its product too far away from what's exciting about wrestling.

Let's face it, some warts and decidedly un-PC elements go with it. I figured that out in seventh grade. □

BORN IN TORONTO, Ontario, on February 20, 1977 ... Studied kinesiology at the University of Toronto and nutrition at Ryerson University before attending Ron Hutchinson's School of Wrestling and Rob Etcheverria's Squared Circle Pro Wrestling Gym for training ... Made pro debut in December 2000 wrestling for the Apocalypse Wrestling Federation as La Felina ... Continued wrestling in various Ontario promotions until meeting Molly Holly, who encouraged Kim to send match clips to WWE in 2001 ... Hired by WWE in October 2002 and reported to Ohio Valley Wrestling for more training ... Stunned the wrestling world by winning the Women's title in WWE debut, outlasting a battle royal field of seven that included defending champion Jazz, on the June 30, 2003, edition of *Raw* ... Held the Women's championship until Holly defeated her on July 28 ... Formed an alliance with Holly to battle Trish Stratus and Lita in a long-running feud ... Suffered a broken collarbone in November 2003 ... Returned to Raw in April 2004 and resumed partnership with Holly ... Was unexpectedly released by WWE on November 3, 2004, and wrestled sporadically on independent and international cards following the completion of her 90-day non-compete clause ... Signed with TNA and made her *Impact* debut in October 2005 as manager of Jeff Jarrett and America's Most Wanted... In-ring debut came at Victory Road 2006, when she wrestled in a six-person mixed tag match, alongside AMW vs. AJ Styles, Christopher

Daniels, and Sirelda ... Kim's team lost, but she got revenge by defeating Sirelda in a singles match at Hard Justice a month later ... Feuded with AMW member James Storm after the tag team dissolved, which led to a grudge with Storm's new manager, Jacqueline ... Feud with Jacqueline ended after Gail defeated her in a cage at Lockdown 2007, and in a streetfight on

the Year, which qualified her for the three-way Knockouts title bout at Destination X vs. Kong and ODB ... Kong won ... Feud with Kong persisted, as did an on-again, off-again rivalry with Angelina Love and The Beautiful People ... Kim's TNA contract expired in mid-August 2008, and she chose not to re-sign ... Resurfaced in WWE on the March 27 episode of *Smackdown*, attacking Michelle McCool and Maryse ... Outdueled by Maryse in a tournament final for the vacant Divas championship in June 2010 ... Began romance with Daniel Bryan that led to a feud with The Bella Twins, who were also vying for Bryan's attention ... Entered a number-one contender Divas battle royal on the August 1 episode of *Raw*, but eliminated herself a minute into the match, and later announced that she was leaving WWE forever ... Showed up in TNA in October and was named number-one contender to Velvet Sky's Knockouts championship ... Before she could get her title shot, though, Kim and Madison Rayne beat Brooke Tessmacher and Tara to win the Knockouts tag team title ... Defeated Sky at Turning Point to win her second

Knockouts crown ... Successfully defended the title against Sky, Mickie James, Tara, Tessmacher, and Rayne ... Married celebrity chef Robert Irvine on May 10, 2012 ... Became TNA's longest-reigning Knockouts champion on May 20, surpassing Rayne's previous record of 188 consecutive days ... Kim's reign ended at 210 days when Tessmacher defeated her for the title at Slammiversary 2012.

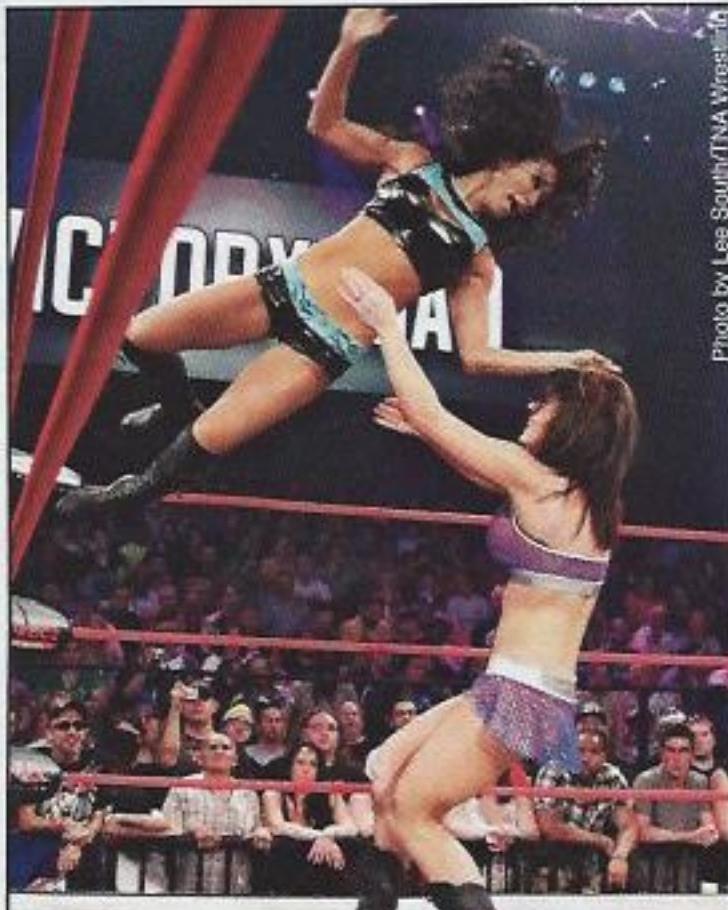
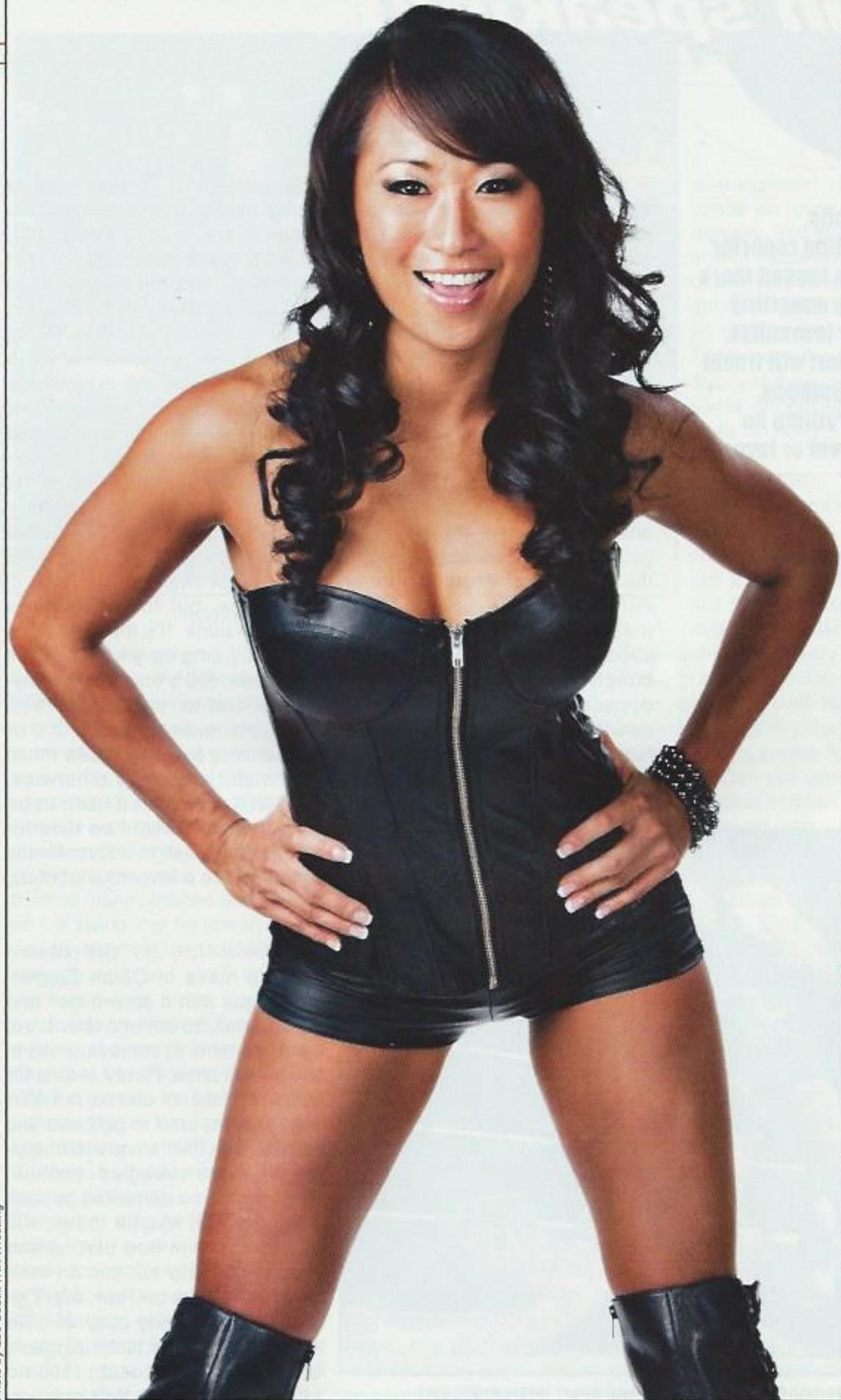


Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

Gail Kim tries to take out former tag partner and Knockouts champion Madison Rayne at Victory Road. These women were temporarily estranged after dropping the Knockouts tag team title, but seem to be on friendly terms once again.

the May 3 episode of *Impact* ... Outlasted nine other women in a gauntlet match at Bound for Glory 2007 to become TNA's first Knockouts champion ... Retained title against ODB, Roxxi Laveaux, and Angelina Love before entering a series of matches with Awesome Kong ... Twice defeated Kong by DQ, but was beaten for the title by Kong on January 10, 2008 ... TNA named Kim the 2007 Knockout of



**GAIL KIM
360**

plain speaking

With Matt Brock

**Harder than nails,
veteran wrestling reporter
Matt Brock has logged more
miles covering wrestling
than any other journalist.
Every month Matt will travel
to the sport's hotbeds,
reporting everything he
sees without fear or favor**

BRIDGEWATER, MA: It sure wasn't drawing quite the buzz (or even five percent of the buzz) that the famed best-of-seven series between Nikita Koloff and Magnum T.A. over the U.S. title in 1986 did (note to you young fans out there: that belt actually was worth a little something when it fell under the auspices of the old NWA), but a chance to take in a piece of this best-of-seven "Seven Levels Of Hate" series for the NWA title between Colt Cabana and Adam Pearce was enough to get me off my duff and heading in the direction of Beantown for an early-summer evening. ¶ Both these guys have had plenty of success in Ring of Honor and a bunch of indies over the past decade, of course, though I'm sure their names still aren't all that familiar to a lot of fans out there (even though Cabana did have half a cup of coffee with Smack-

down as Scotty Goldman a few years back). This one was contested as a Boston streetfight, which I wasn't expecting going in and thus was a bit disappointed because it meant this bout would be light on actual wrestling. ¶ Even so, Cabana got to show off a damn fine moonsault in which his foot actually hit the ceiling of this undersized little building. Ended up finishing Pearce with a submission finisher that has one of the best names in the game today—the Billy Goat's Curse. ¶ Cabana will tell you over and over he's perfectly at peace being back in the indies, but to me, that's a bunch of bunk. It's the right thing to say as long as you are still in the indies. Kid's only in his early-30s and has too much talent to be plying his trade in front of 200 or so diehards every night. As much as I wish I could say otherwise, the NWA ain't what it used to be by a longshot. Might be time for CM Punk to cash in a favor for his friend. It'd be a favor to a lot of us, actually.

UNIONDALE, NY: Still not sure what to make of Dolph Ziggler. Young guy with a decent look and tons of natural athletic talent, but always seems to come up short in the big matches. Plenty of time for that to change, of course, but after a while, fans start to perceive you as not worth their emotional investment if those struggles continue. ¶ I'm even more perplexed by Jack Swagger, but maybe things will improve for him now that he and Ziggler officially cut ties on their partnership here on *Raw*, with Ziggler scoring a fairly easy win. No question Swagger lacks Ziggler's charisma, and no doubt (and no offense to Swagger) he'd look per-



WILL SWAGGER BENEFIT FROM HIS SPLIT WITH ZIGGLER?



Photo by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

ROODE HAS CONTINUED TO IMPRESS

fectly at home running a hog farm somewhere in the Midwest. Yet I have no problem reminding anyone that I had the guy pegged for some pretty big things when I first saw him in FCW. ¶ But allow me to use a baseball analogy (Saks and Krewda just love those) and tell you he looks to me like a struggling young slugger who's getting advice from so many coaches and experts on his swing that he doesn't know which way to turn or what to change and just ends up more confused and more inept than ever. I don't know if Swagger is getting too much advice these days, but it just seems like folks in WWE are trying too hard to force a personality on him instead of letting his natural athletic ability shine through and allowing things to evolve and progress from there. ¶ Swagger may be a bit of a hayseed, but I guarantee you there aren't too many better on the mat in WWE. He reminds me a little of Matt Morgan, who once looked like a can't-miss prospect in WWE. If it could happen, a clean start in TNA might work for Swagger the way it

worked for Morgan, who, oddly enough, may just return to WWE soon.

QUEENS, NY: As a man who is willing to put money on just about anything competitive, I probably wouldn't bet on Perry Saturn winning the PWI Achievement Award for Comeback of the Year in 2012. Usually takes a comeback of a much higher profile than his has been thus far. ¶ The man went through a lot in his many years out of the spotlight (and remember his comeback from a horrific knee injury 15 years ago), and I was never his biggest fan, even going back to his days as part of The Eliminators in ECW. But I've seen him a couple of times live this year and the guy looks pretty damn good. ¶ Given his age and injury history, I don't see a return to WWE in his future, mind you, but that doesn't mean I didn't like what I saw in his match with fellow (albeit far less accomplished) ECW alumnus Danny Doring on this Showcase Championship Wrestling event. Saturn is still as intense as ever and delivered a

nice exploder suplex and brain-buster en route to victory. ¶ Incidentally, this show also featured one of those odd indy matchups of two very different stars of two different eras in Marty Jannetty vs. SCW champ Stevie Richards. For those who appreciate Richards' act, he looks like he still has some decent years left in him, while Jannetty ... well, doesn't.

HOUSTON, TX: I'm more and more impressed by Bobby Roode's reign as TNA World champ every time I see him. Not just the wins he has racked up, but the fact that his effort and matches as champion have been consistently very strong since he grabbed the top spot. ¶ Here, he outfoxed Jeff Hardy yet again, using a low blow to set up a fisherman's suplex for a house-show win. Can see where fans are really buying into him as champion as well, even if they still don't like him much. ¶ Also of interest here was that for all the bluster about Crimson's undefeated streak, once that disappeared, his fortunes really have taken a dip. Suffered one in what was a series of losses to Matt Morgan here. ¶ What wasn't of interest to me or to a lot of people in the house was another forgettable victory by Garrett Bischoff. So much for the hope that his 15 minutes were up. He needed less than half that to beat Gunner by pinfall. Young Garrett got a bit of the John Cena treatment in that the younger set and the screaming females tried to stick up for him, while everyone else was indifferent at best. ¶ Just please try to assure me that with Brooke Hogan in the TNA fold now, there isn't a second-generation Hogan vs. Bischoff feud in the works. □

A NEW DIMENSION FOR A 3-D LEGEND

The TNA TV Title Holds Special Significance For Devon

There are those who justifiably minimize the significance of a TV title. For Devon, however, the TNA TV belt holds special personal meaning. He also happens to think that the significance of his title will increase with time

By Stu Saks

Photos by Lee South/TNA Wrestling

WITH HIS RESUME of "championships and accomplishments" running nearly 1,500 characters on Wikipedia, there is nothing shy of a world title belt that Devon needs to justify his place in this sport's annals. As we close in on two year's since his split with the man with whom he shares most of his greatest successes, Bully Ray, there is a sense of contentment that the 40-year-old never thought he would experience.

"I never really thought about wrestling past my 40th birthday," Devon said, "but I'm loving this all too much to even think about hanging it up."





Devon leaves his feet to deliver a forearm shiver to the 6'4" Rob Terry. Week by week, the quality of challengers to the TNA TV title is increasing, which suits Devon just fine.

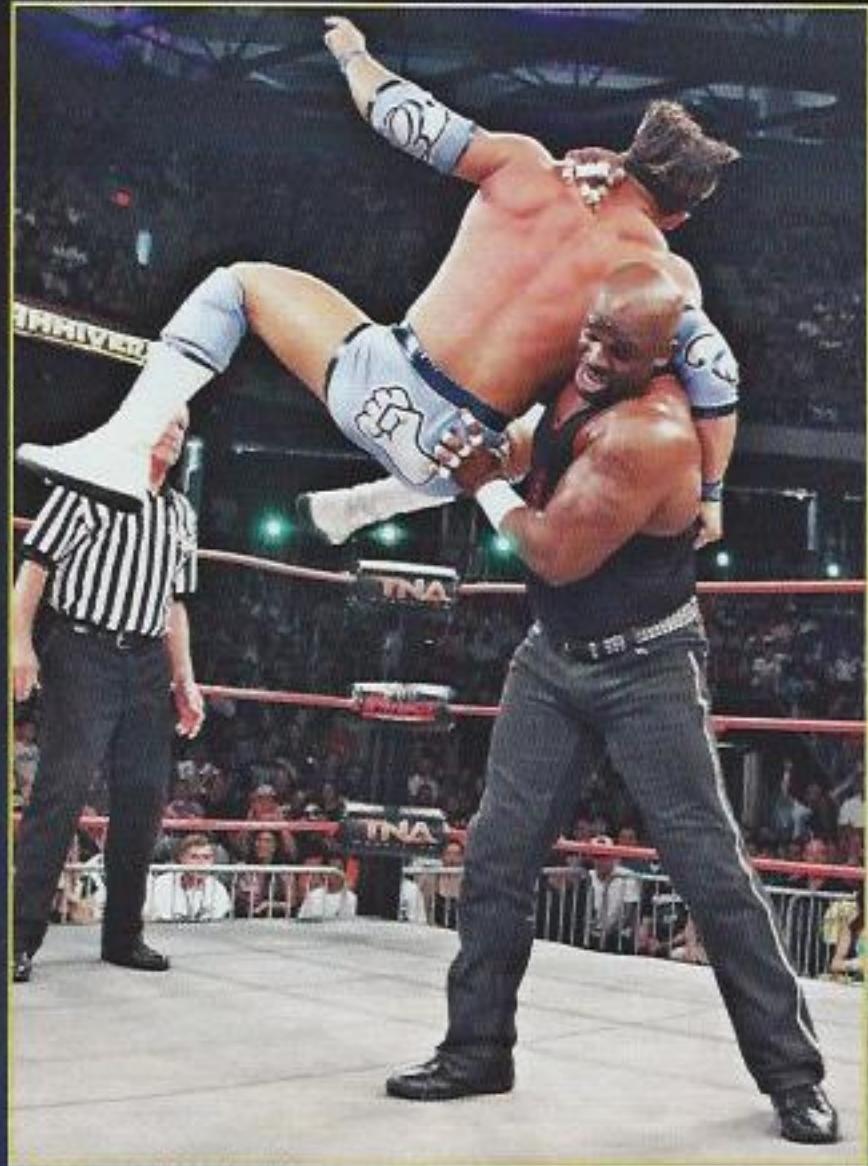
Devon lifted his TV title belt to within two inches of his mouth and let out a huff of air. The large buckle fogged up slightly and Devon rubbed it with a soft cloth he had stuffed in the back pocket of his jeans.

Considering Devon has held a portion of world tag team titles 21 times, his relationship with the TV title belt is a little surprising. If a world title is the accepted industry standard of accomplishment, holding a TV title is no more significant in wrestling than leading the league in advancing runners on groundball outs would be in baseball. They're both nice, but they're not very strong bargaining chips when it comes time to talk contract.

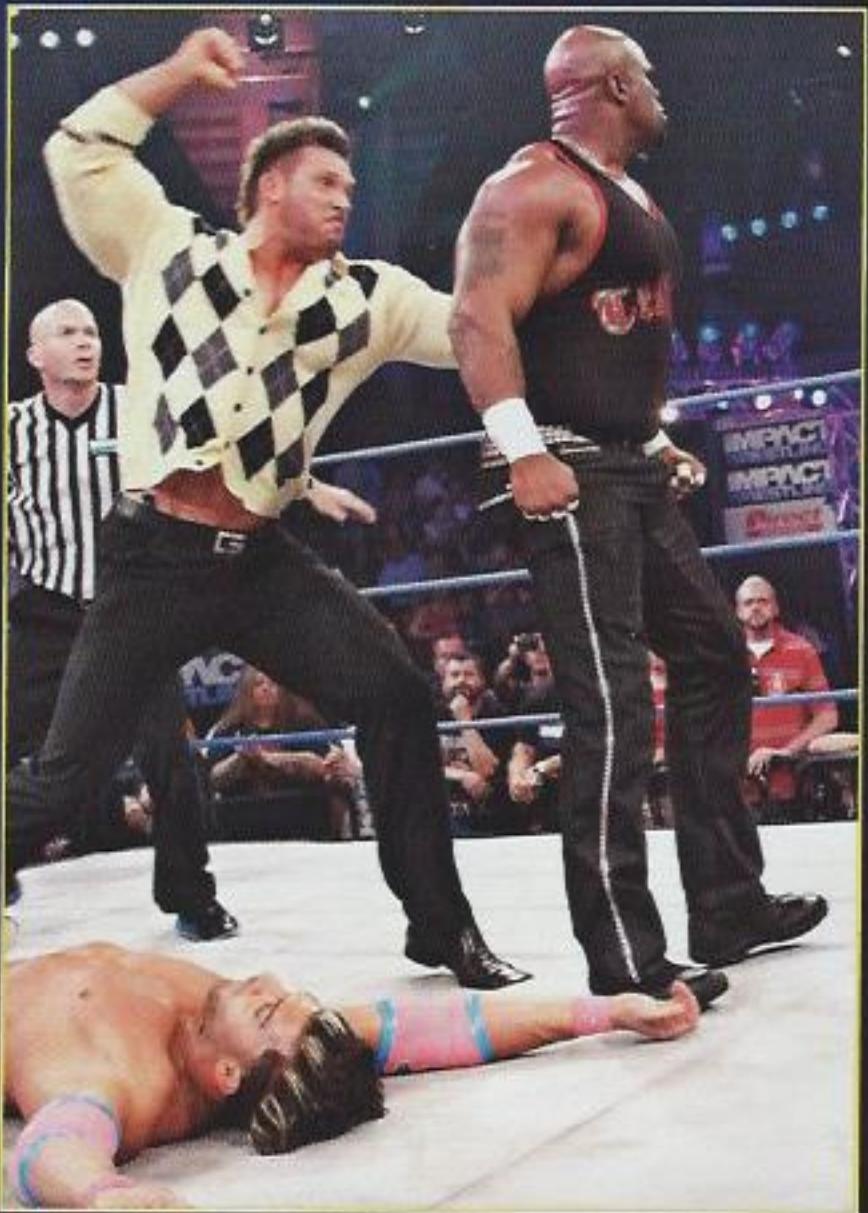
After being a headliner in ECW, WCW, WWE, and TNA for much of his 20-year career, however, Devon has a different perspective on the sport than most. He has a few things remaining on his professional want list, but there are no needs, including a world title reign. "I started my career as a single, with the same aspirations as anybody else," he said. "But once I became part of a steady tag team, I was having too much fun to stop. I can rehash what went down between me and Ray in our final days together, but what's the point? Life's too short to dwell on the negative. I have a lot of great, great memories with him as my partner. Let's just leave it at that."

After Team 3-D dissolved, Devon had to start at the bottom of the singles division and work his way back up on his own. "That never bothered me," he said. "What did bother me was that people would not just let the Team 3-D thing pass. Rather than give me respect as a solo, they kept waiting for Ray to come to his senses—or maybe me—and re-form the team."

Devon could rationalize that as the reason he wasn't invited to compete in the Bound For Glory series in 2011, though that would not explain the inclusion of Bully Ray, who would come in second to



Devon slams former TV champ Robbie E to the mat (above), but makes the mistake of turning his back on Robbie T (below). Sometimes it seems to slip Devon's mind that he doesn't have a partner to watch his back.



Bobby Roode. Devon was also not invited to participate in the 2012 series, but there's a reasonable explanation for his exclusion.

"Hey," he said, "my time is spoken for."

Devon pawed at the lettering on the TV belt for a few seconds before picking up his thought. "I have to admit, when I first beat Robbie E for the title, I didn't think it was a huge deal. After all, the best guys were naturally gunning for the World title, so, I thought, who'd be interested in this? But the 'Hulkster' changed everything, man."

Devon was a month into his reign when TNA General Manager Hogan made the announcing that, henceforth, the TNA TV title would be defended each week on *Impact*. Some men in Devon's position might shudder at such a challenge, but Devon welcomed it with open arms. To him, it meant that he'd be guaranteed TV time for as long as we was champion, plus, by necessity, he'd be fed fresh challengers most weeks.

"But not just that," added Devon. "The fact that Hulk Hogan thought enough of this title to make such a ruling gives this belt an extra layer of credibility."

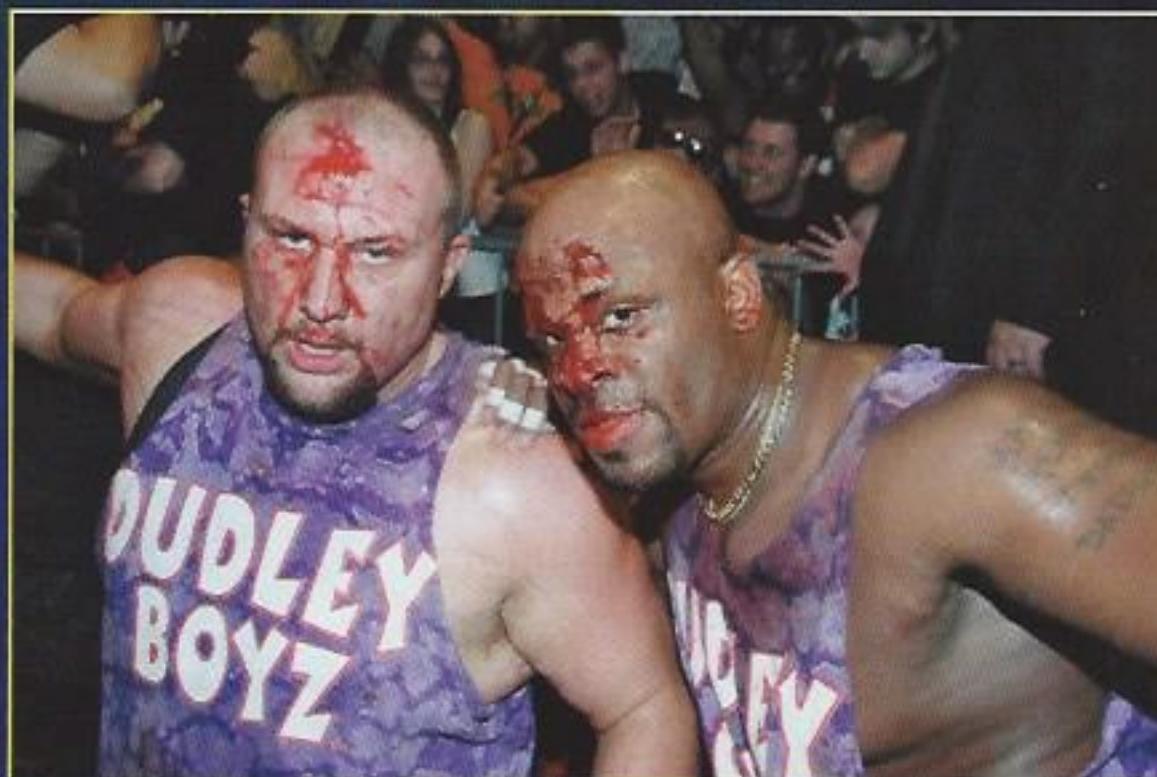
It all measures up to just what Devon was looking for at this point in his illustrious career. He knows there are certain aspects of the sport over which he has no control, like being granted World title shots or even being put in a position to earn one by being included in the Bound For Glory series. What the TV title—and Hogan's proclamation—have given him is the ability to control his own destiny.

"If people want to degrade my title, that's up to them," he said. "All I can do is go out there week in and week out and defend it against the best they throw my way. Sooner or later, this so-called secondary title is going to become very important."

At the time of Hogan's announcement, some observers speculated that the GM was intent on stacking the odds against Devon, or at least trying to ensure that there were frequent title changes on *Impact*, by forcing the champion to make such frequent defenses. Devon feels the schedule actually helps him. "Athletes like to get into a routine," he said. "A starting pitcher, for instance, plays every fifth day,



Charge wildly at Devon and expect to pay a price. Gunner loses his cool against the veteran TV champ and will soon find himself laid out on his back.



It's not out the realm of possibility that Bully and Devon will reconcile at some point in the future. Devon is just grateful that his solo career is no longer stalled by the expectation that they will re-form their great tag team.

but in between starts he knows exactly when he's going to light toss on the sidelines and have serious bullpen sessions. If he deviates from that pattern, it does something to his psyche.

"With me, having a regular title schedule sets up my routine for the entire week. I know exactly what do to with myself every day to prepare for that match. My opponent can only guess. I think the advantage is mine."

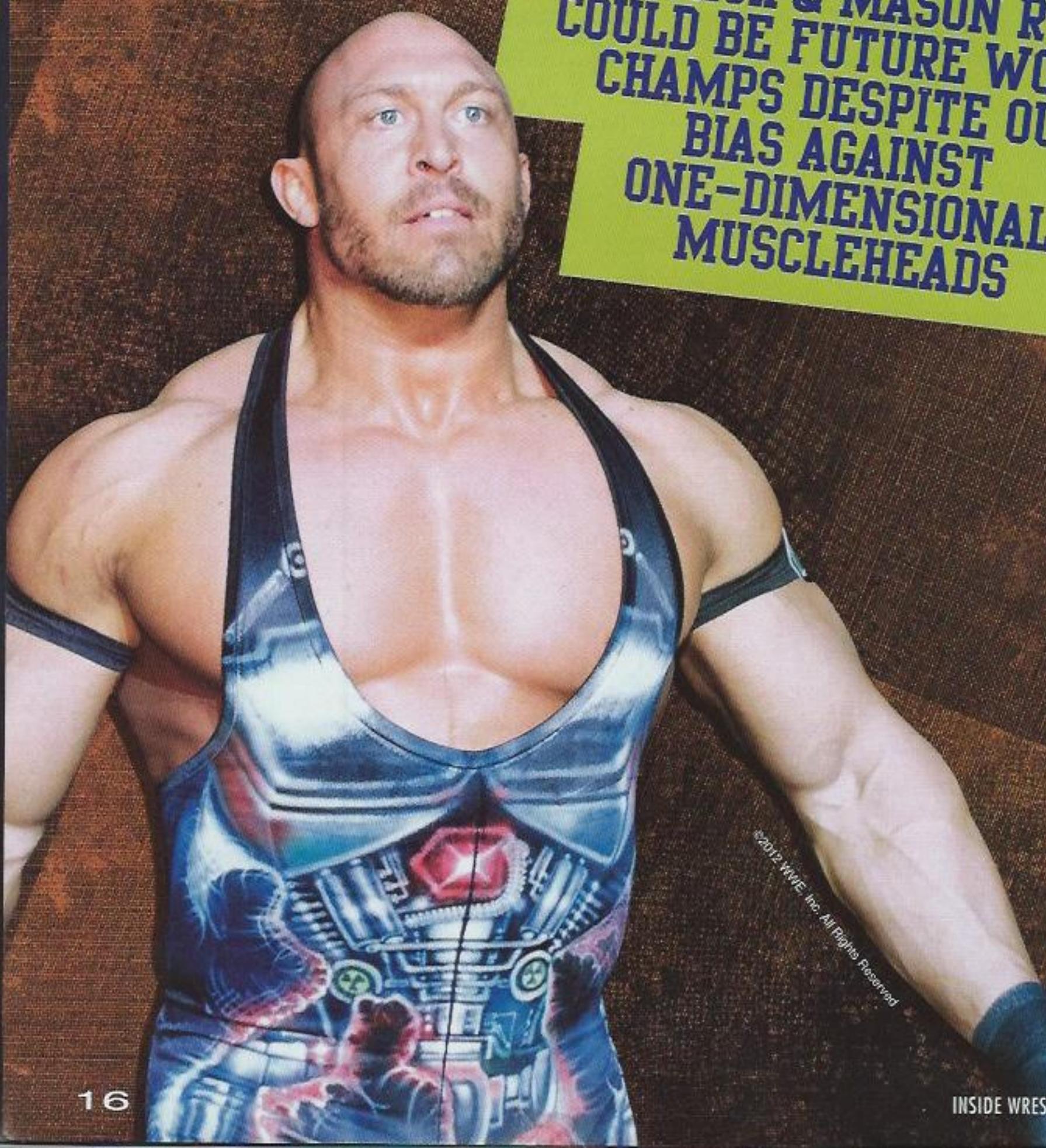
Robbies E&T, Garett Bischoff, Hernandez, Jeff Hardy, and Bully Ray have tried to take Devon's TV title and come up empty. Asked which of those defenses was the most satisfying, Devon at first said "all." When pressed, he flung the title belt over his left shoulder, rose to his feet, and said, "Guess."

He is, indeed, a happy man. □

Photo by George Napolitano

RYNOT?

RYBACK & MASON RYAN
COULD BE FUTURE WORLD
CHAMPS DESPITE OUR
BIAS AGAINST
ONE-DIMENSIONAL
MUSCLEHEADS



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RYBACK AND MASON RYAN ARE TRYING TO FIND THEIR WAY IN A WRESTLING UNIVERSE THAT IS HOSTILE TO WRESTLERS WHO DON'T HAVE THE SKILLS TO MATCH THEIR PHYSIQUES. MIGHT THOSE SKILLS DEVELOP WITH TIME? NOT IF WE DON'T SHOW A LITTLE PATIENCE

By Stu Saks

AS THE SPORT of professional wrestling evolves, so do its fans. Before the 1980s, it was unfathomable for wrestling fans to throw their support behind those who this magazine referred to as "rulebreakers." In the 1980s and into the '90s, fans fell for larger-than-life humans like Hulk Hogan, Ultimate Warrior, and Lex Luger. Slowly, though, fans came to believe that bigger isn't necessarily better and that they would prefer a quality athlete to a muscled-up cartoon character.

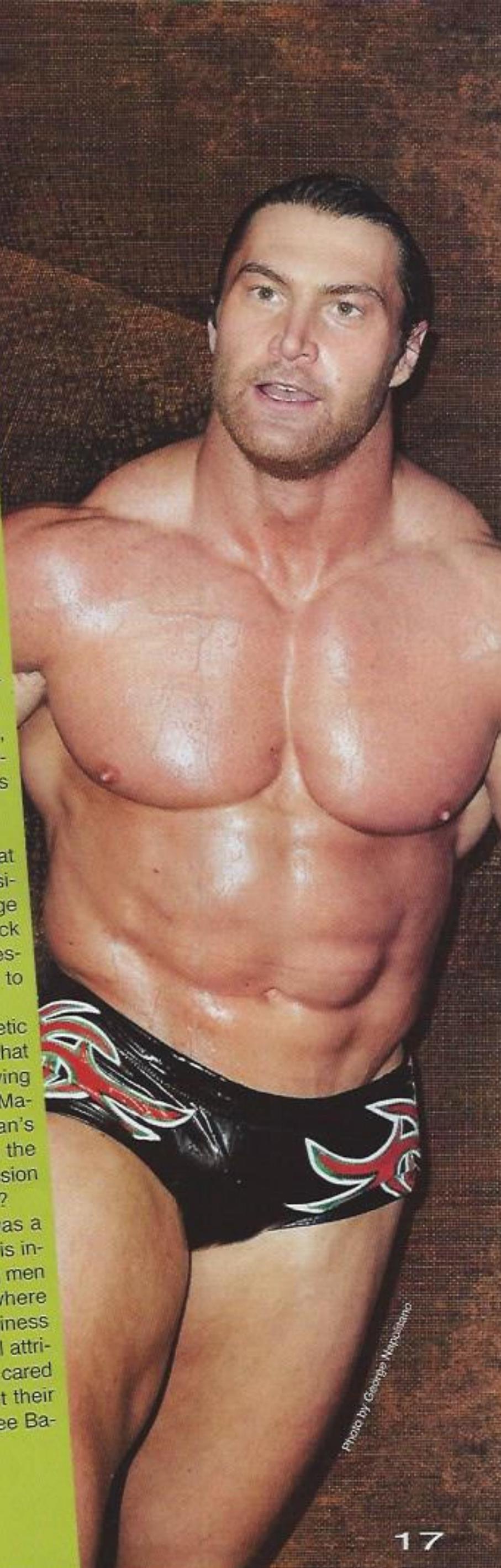
Men like CM Punk, Davey Richards, Daniel Bryan, and Austin Aries wouldn't have stood a chance of being stars in the '80s and '90s. Today, the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction.

Perhaps too far.

Today's fans often pre-judge big men, assuming that they are being showcased only because of their physical stature. It's hard to say they are being unfair. A large frame with large muscles will enable a man to knock down barriers that would block an average-sized wrestler. What isn't fair is not giving these men a chance to show that they are willing to better themselves.

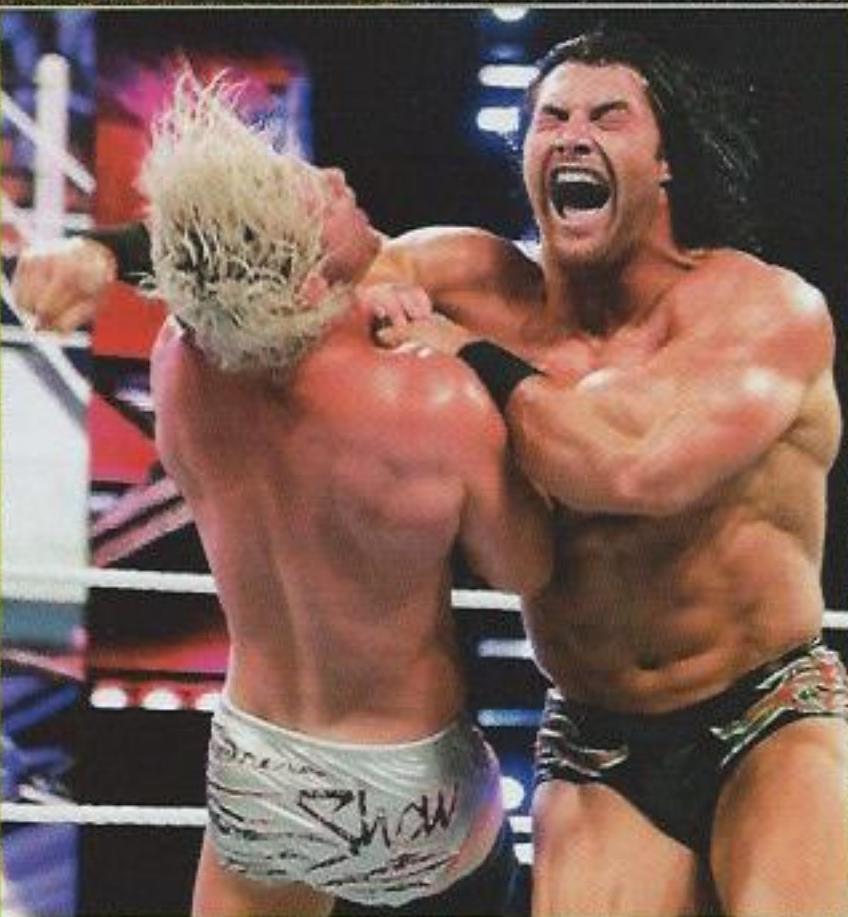
We may not think much of Rob Terry from an athletic standpoint, but how many fans are aware of the fact that he's working his tail off in Ohio Valley Wrestling trying to become a better all-round wrestler? We look at Mason Ryan and Ryback and proclaim them poor man's Batistas. But think back to Batista's early days in the business. Didn't many of us have the same impression of him then that we have of Ryan and Ryback now?

As fondly as we remember Batista, he never was a masterful wrestler. What attracted us to him was his intensity and willingness to expose his soul. Many big men project a demeanor that they don't want to be where they are, that the only reason they're in this business is for the opportunity to capitalize on their physical attributes. Batista always gave the impression that he cared about his career and the people who shelled out their hard-earned money to observe it. We came to see Batista as a person, not just a bag of muscles.





Ryback takes Jacob Kaye off his feet with a well-placed boot to the midsection (above). Ryan may have lost to Dolph Ziggler (below), but at least he's wrestling opponents we've heard of.



Ryan and Ryback? We don't know much more about them than what we see in the ring. We know Ryan was recruited for the New Nexus by CM Punk. Some might know that the Welshman was a dominant champion in WWE's development territory, FCW. Ryback was a finalist on Season Four of *Tough Enough*, signed with WWE, was released

by WWE, and was finally signed again. He was assigned to FCW, where he adopted the name Skip Sheffield. He was an original Nexus member and part of the unwieldy crew that attacked John Cena and CM Punk before breaking up the set.

They're both 30. They're both nowhere near title contention. They're both disrespected by a large number of fans in an era when people are more discriminating about talent, and at the same time discriminate against performers who haven't had an opportunity to prove that they can do more than throw their weight around.

"Both Ryan and Ryback are experiencing the backlash of the sport trying to force-feed the fans musclemen like Ultimate Warrior and Scott Steiner," said Rob LaSalle, a 33-year-old fan from New Rochelle, New York. "You ask if it's fair? Maybe not. But these guys have it within their own power to make people see beyond their preconceived notions. If they can actually learn on the job, the fans will be bright enough to recognize that."

It's interesting that LaSalle chose Steiner as one of his examples. Scott was an amateur standout who came into the pros with a deep arsenal of moves. It was by choice that he became the muscle-bound "Big Poppa Pump," dumping his athletic style in favor of one that was better suited to his new super-sized physique. The timing for him to make such a radical transformation was right. A money move in 1998 might have proved disastrous today.

"We've seen enough big men who can't move," said Martin Alexander of Loyola, Maryland. "It's no different than a lot of other sports. In basketball, would you rather watch a lumbering 7'1" center who can just clog the middle or one that may be a few inches shorter but can do more athletically?"

But even if Ryback and Ryan never pan out from an athletic standpoint, isn't there a place in all sports for a variety of styles? George Foreman could do nothing but punch, yet he was one of the most effective and entertaining fighters of all-time. Sports is all about winning. Each man or woman has to utilize their own gifts in a manner that produces the best results. Ryback and Ryan are not built to be Sin Cara; that's quite evident. Let's say, for argument's sake, that the Ry-men have every bit as much desire to be successful pro wrestlers as men who have more natural agility and style. Should we deprive them of the respect we give to any other wrestler who gives his all in the ring?

Fans might not approve of the fact that Ryback is being fed two nobodies each week to rip apart. But that's not his call. He'll be tested against a better grade of competition when the promoters feel it's appropriate. Fans may also not approve of the fact that Ryan has a similar look to a man they so dearly miss, Batista. But you certainly can't hold that against him.

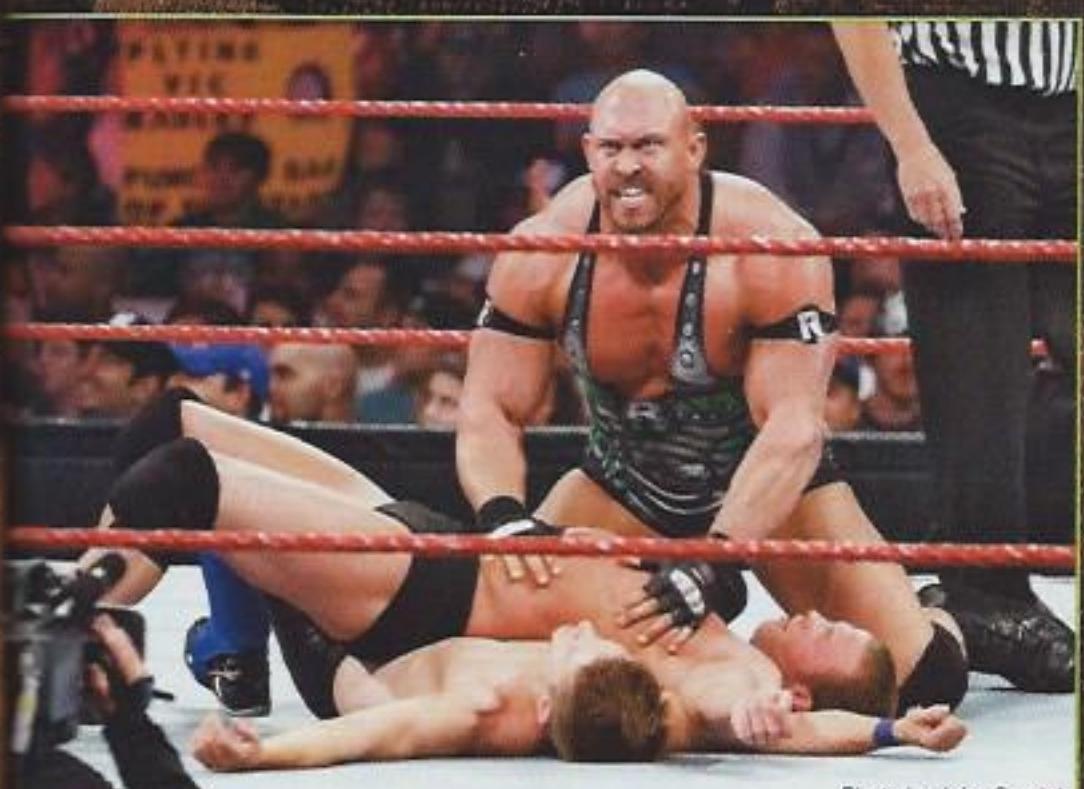


Photo by John Smolek

Aaron Relic and Jay Hatton would both have pinfall defeats on record after being pummeled by Ryback at Extreme Rules. Wrestling fans are impatiently awaiting an end to this stream of handicap matches and a step up in competition for Ryback.

Now it is a fact that promoters are continuously on the lookout for that rare big man who, in addition to size, has athletic ability and a charismatic personality. The overwhelming majority of those men are given a shot because of their size (and perhaps athletic back-



Photo by George Napolitano

Ryan was recruited to the new Nexus by CM Punk (in background) to punish men like Rey Mysterio Jr. Though there may indeed be a little Batista in Ryan, he'll have to overcome a prejudice against power merchants to gain a similarly loyal following.

ground), with the hope they will develop the other attributes as they mature in the sport. Granted, this almost never works. But if Ryback and Ryan are to fail, let's let them do it on their own merits, and, one way or the other, let's be fair and give them some time. □

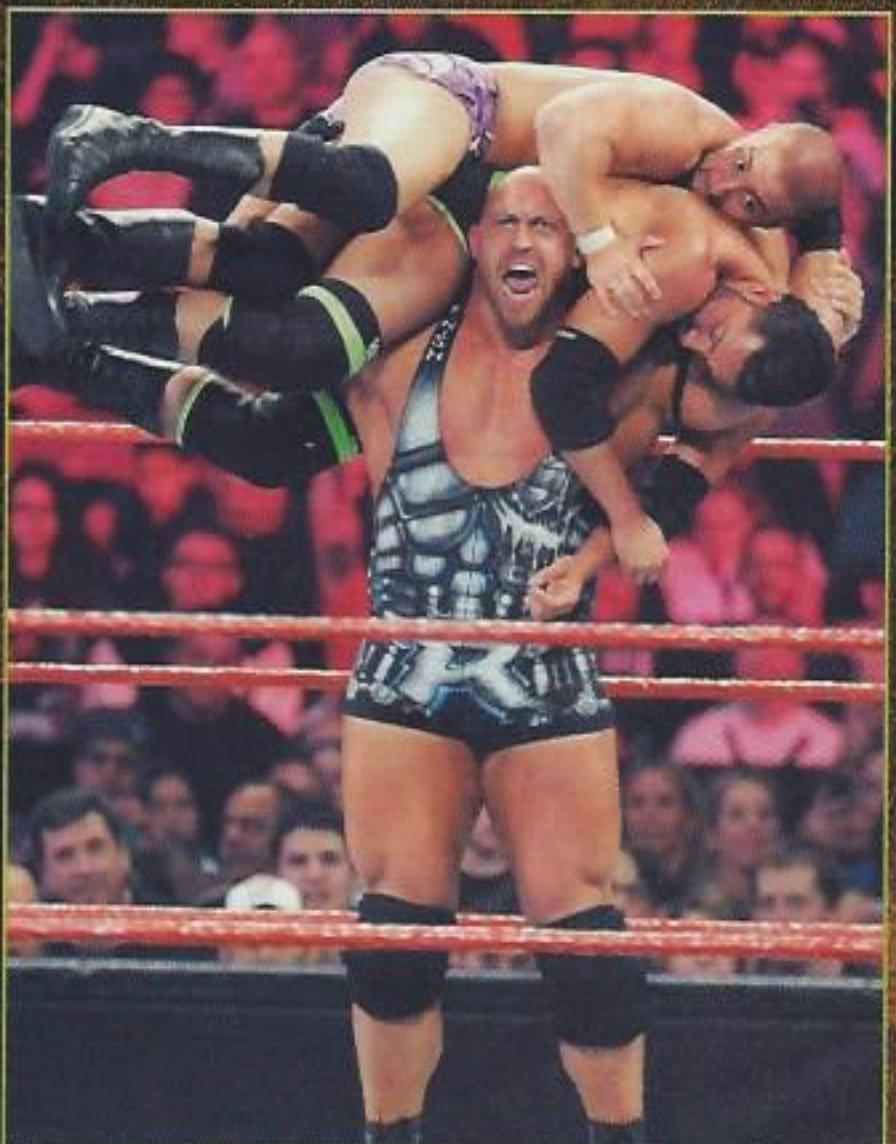


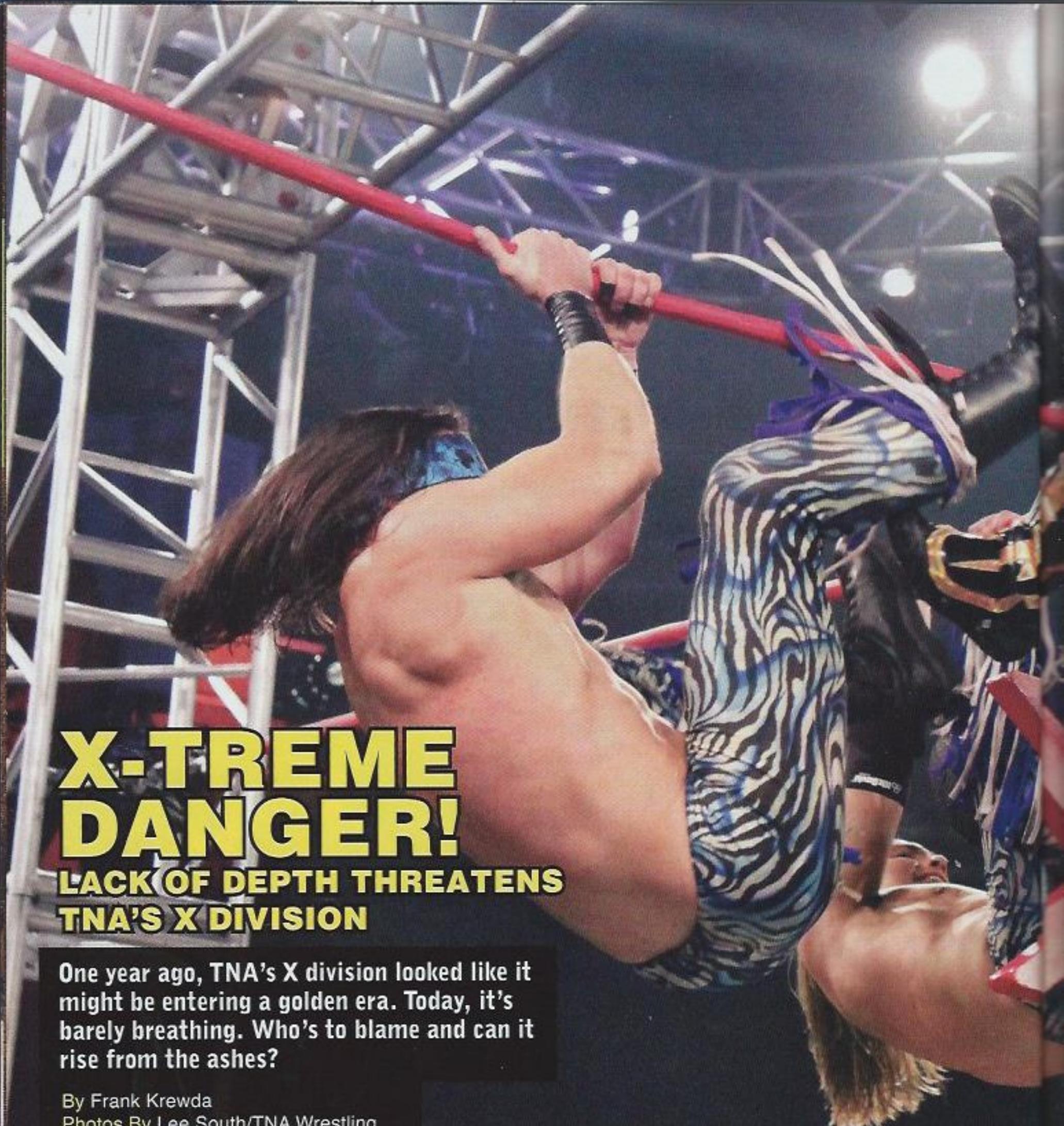
Photo by George Napolitano

Okay, say the cynics, you're stronger than Dan Delaney and Rob Grymes combined, but how much skill does it take to do this? The fans want and expect more out of today's big men than just raw strength.



Photo by Duane Long

Jack Swagger is a good example of a big man who also possesses grappling skills. But he has an amateur wrestling background to draw from. Ryan, about to slam the Okie, could acquire those skills, but the fans and promoters have to be patient with him.



X-TREME DANGER!

LACK OF DEPTH THREATENS TNA'S X DIVISION

One year ago, TNA's X division looked like it might be entering a golden era. Today, it's barely breathing. Who's to blame and can it rise from the ashes?

By Frank Krewda

Photos By Lee South/TNA Wrestling

NOT ALL FANS are sold on cruiserweight wrestling, but many would probably agree that, on the whole, the TNA product is better for having a division that provides an alternative to pure heavyweight action. Unfortunately, though, they'd probably also agree that TNA has, mismanaged its X division from time to time over the years.

As TNA headed into Destination X 2011, the company boasted an X division roster of 21 wrestlers, and management appeared to be completely behind

the idea of prominently featuring its cruiserweights on *Impact Wrestling* and TNA pay-per-views. In fact, in the weeks prior to Destination X 2011, TNA even held a 12-man X division tournament with the winner, Austin Aries, securing a TNA contract at the monthly show.

When the company headed into Destination X 2012, though, the list of X division wrestlers still ran from A to Z (Austin Aries to Zema Ion), but the list was 10 names shorter, and TNA management didn't



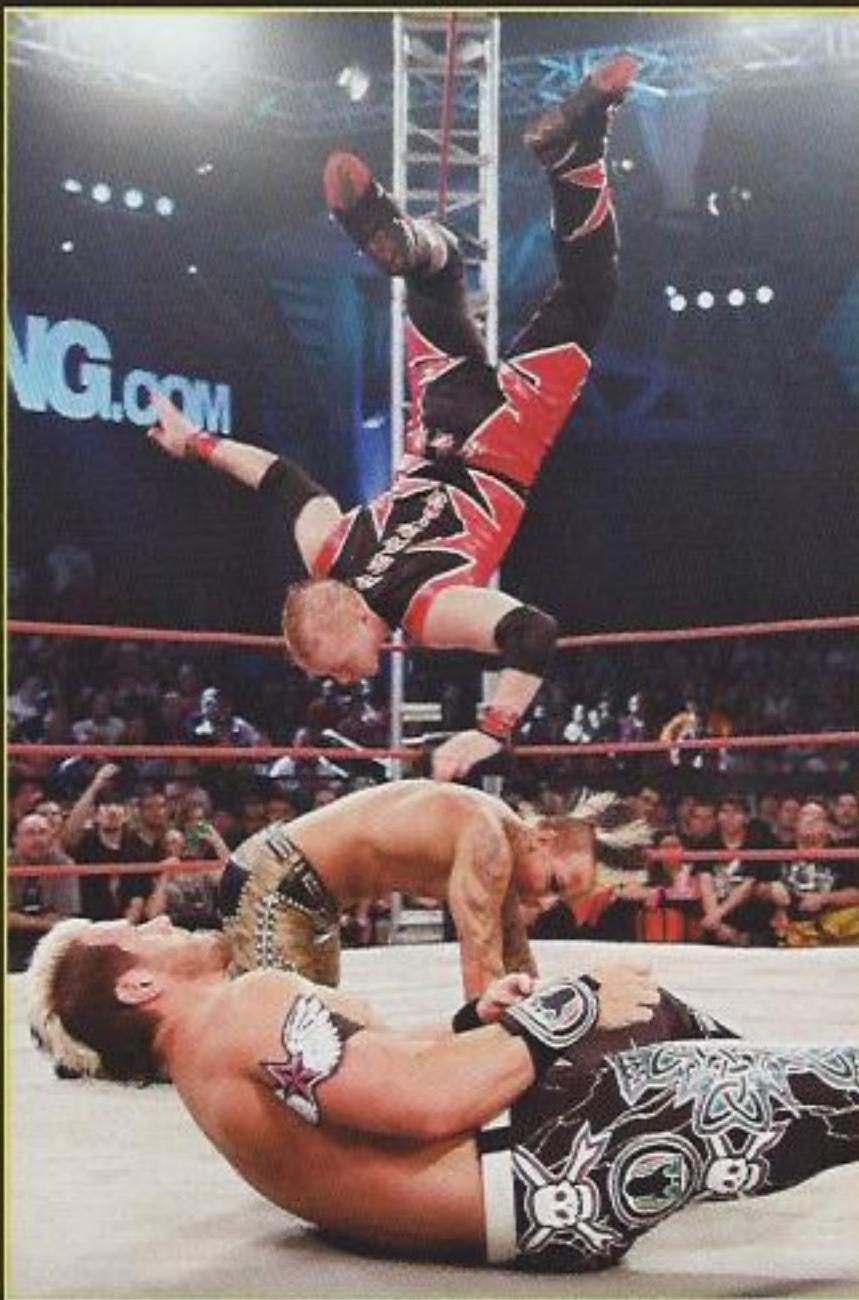
appear nearly as enthusiastic about its cruisers as it had in 2011.

In the span of just 12 months, all the momentum the X division gained in 2011 was gone. The roster was paper thin, and X division matches, except Destination X's Ultimate X match, were relegated to opening and mid-card bouts, prompting observers to wonder what happened to the X division push we were all expecting.

As with any dramatic reversal of fortune, the

causes of the X division's slide are myriad and complex, but, certainly, injuries contributed heavily to them.

This time last year, for example, Jesse Sorensen was battling Austin Aries and Kid Kash hard for the X division title. But in February 2012, Jesse suffered a fracture to his C-1 vertebra after taking a high-flying move from Ion. Doctors said Sorensen, who was temporarily paralyzed by the injury, may very well need a full year to recover.



Amazing Red, Shannon Moore, and Alex Shelley may have inspired renewed interest in the X division, but of the three, only Moore remains in TNA as of press time—and he hasn't been featured on *Impact Wrestling* in quite some time.

Kash would miss several months with a broken nose before taking an unexplained hiatus that lasted many additional weeks. He returned at Slammiversary in June 2012, but lost to a heavyweight, Hernandez, indicating that his status as an X division wrestler may be up in the air.

Chris Sabin, who'd wrestled several X division bouts while his former partner and fellow X division stalwart, Alex Shelley, was out nursing his own injuries, blew out his right knee in April 2011. He rehabbed the injury, returned to TNA in May 2012, and promptly blew out his left knee in a title match with Aries. Sabin may not see action again this year.

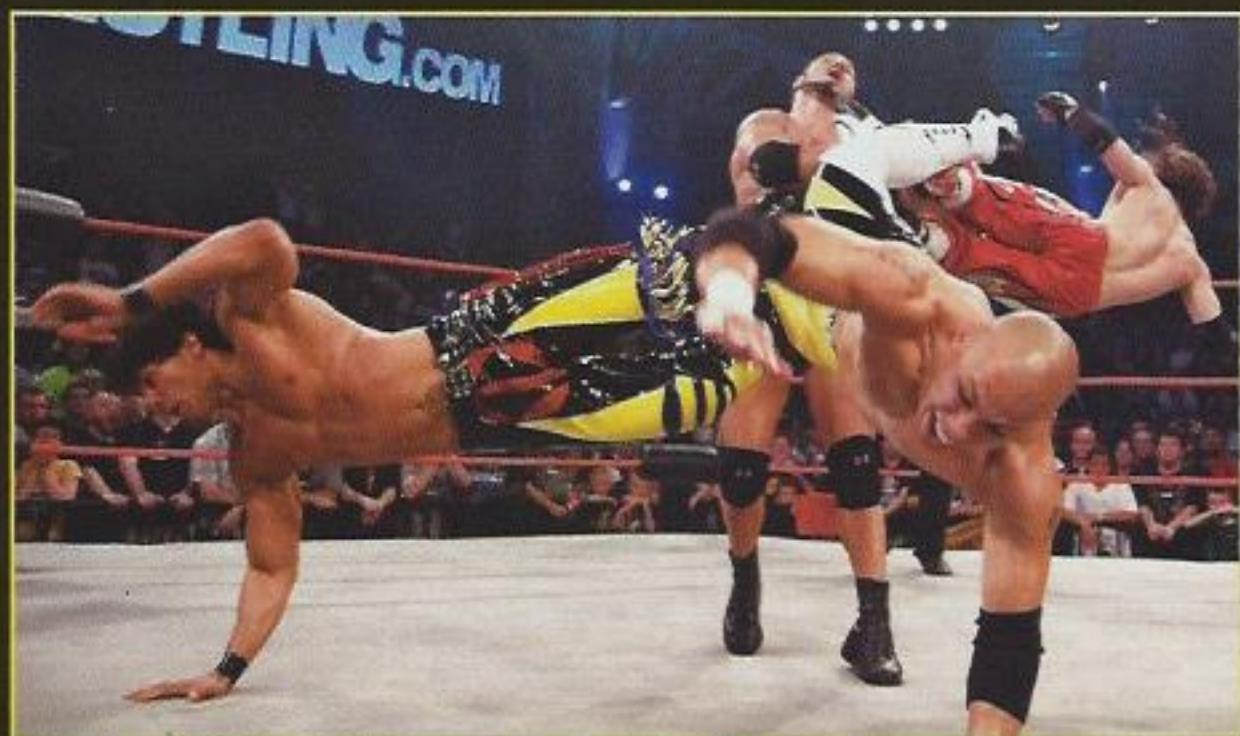
Given the high-risk nature of the X division style, nobody should be surprised that so many cruiserweights have

gone down with injuries. But injuries do not take TNA's decision-makers off the hook for failing to keep the X division relevant after taking some positive steps to promote it.

For example, Eric Bischoff, who is said to have little interest or faith in the X division, instituted an official weight limit of 225 pounds in August 2011, ostensibly to prevent super heavyweights like former X champs Abyss and Samoa Joe from not only trouncing smaller men for the title, but also to uphold the spirit of the division. Part of the X division push involved TNA touting its slogan "It's not about weight limits, it's about no limits." But with Abyss and Joe competing against wrestlers half their size or smaller, even Bischoff knew there was no way the company could showcase bouts that pitted such grossly mismatched combatants.

"Setting a weight limit for the X division was an obvious call," said Bischoff. "We didn't want there to be a million rules governing the division, but some things just made sense, and capping the size of the wrestlers was one of them. How could our cruisers get to show off their skill if Abyss was just swatting them down like flies?"

Bischoff's mandate was indeed a strong first step in making the X division relevant again, and it coincided with a flurry of exciting potential acquisitions. Men like Aries, Ion, Low-Ki, Jack Evans, Dakota Darsow, Mark Haskins, and Tony Nese were all courted and used by TNA for varying lengths of time. But soon, the very wrestlers we expected to see at the vanguard of an X division renaissance began disappearing from TNA TV one by one. Along with most of the talented newcomers, several established cruisers like Brian Kendrick, Jay Lethal, and Amazing Red left TNA. Shannon Moore took an ex-



In a PWI Match of the Year candidate at 2011's Destination X, Low-Ki, Zema Ion, and Jack Evans all deliver dropkicks to eventual winner Austin Aries, who would walk away from the show with a TNA contract. Even if TNA wanted to reprise the 12-man cruiserweight tourney in 2012, they have too few hands in the X division to do it.

tended leave of absence from TNA and Nese requested and received his release.

On June 21, Aries, the longest reigning champion in any TNA division, announced his decision to turn over his X division title in exchange for a shot at Bobby Roode's TNA World heavyweight championship at the Destination X pay-per-view. Before doing so, however, he struck a deal with TNA GM Hulk Hogan that this would set a precedent for future X division champions: Each year, the reigning X division champion would be given an opportunity to trade in his belt for the opportunity to wrestle the World champion at Destination X.

While this potentially could add to the division's prestige, it's actually a huge gamble for both Aries and the company. Some people applauded TNA for letting Aries chase his dream, but few seemed to understand that he may have traded away the future of the X division in that Faustian bargain.

If Roode makes quick work of Aries when they meet, fans will continue saying what they've always said—that X division wrestlers have no business wrestling heavyweights. Should Aries defeat Roode for the World title, it will look like he was merely using the X title as a steppingstone to the World championship, which creates the perception that the company's longest-reigning X division champion was more concerned with winning a title other than the one he was obligated to defend. In any case, the outcome reflects poorly on the X division.

Now that Aries is competing among the heavyweights, TNA desperately needs to add depth to the X division roster before its fans lose interest altogether. The addition of Gut Check Challenge winners Alex Silva and Joey Ryan, both of whom meet the X division weight limit, might help, but the X division will need more than just two new faces if it hopes to return to prominence. □



Ryan pummels Aries during a recent episode of *Impact*. Ryan was initially denied a roster spot after a Gut Check Challenge, but it is commonly believed that he will eventually be signed to add depth to a struggling X division.



Hogan and Aries hash out the fate of the X division title, eventually reaching the conclusion that Aries would relinquish the belt for a shot at Bobby Roode's World title. There could be a positive long-term impact from that decision, but it could also be disastrous given the current depth of the division.



Vickie Guerrero, Eve Torres, and AJ Lee are calculating women who may or may not have their men's interests at heart—but who most definitely will do anything to further their position in this business.

Photos by George Napolitano



Man-Eaters!

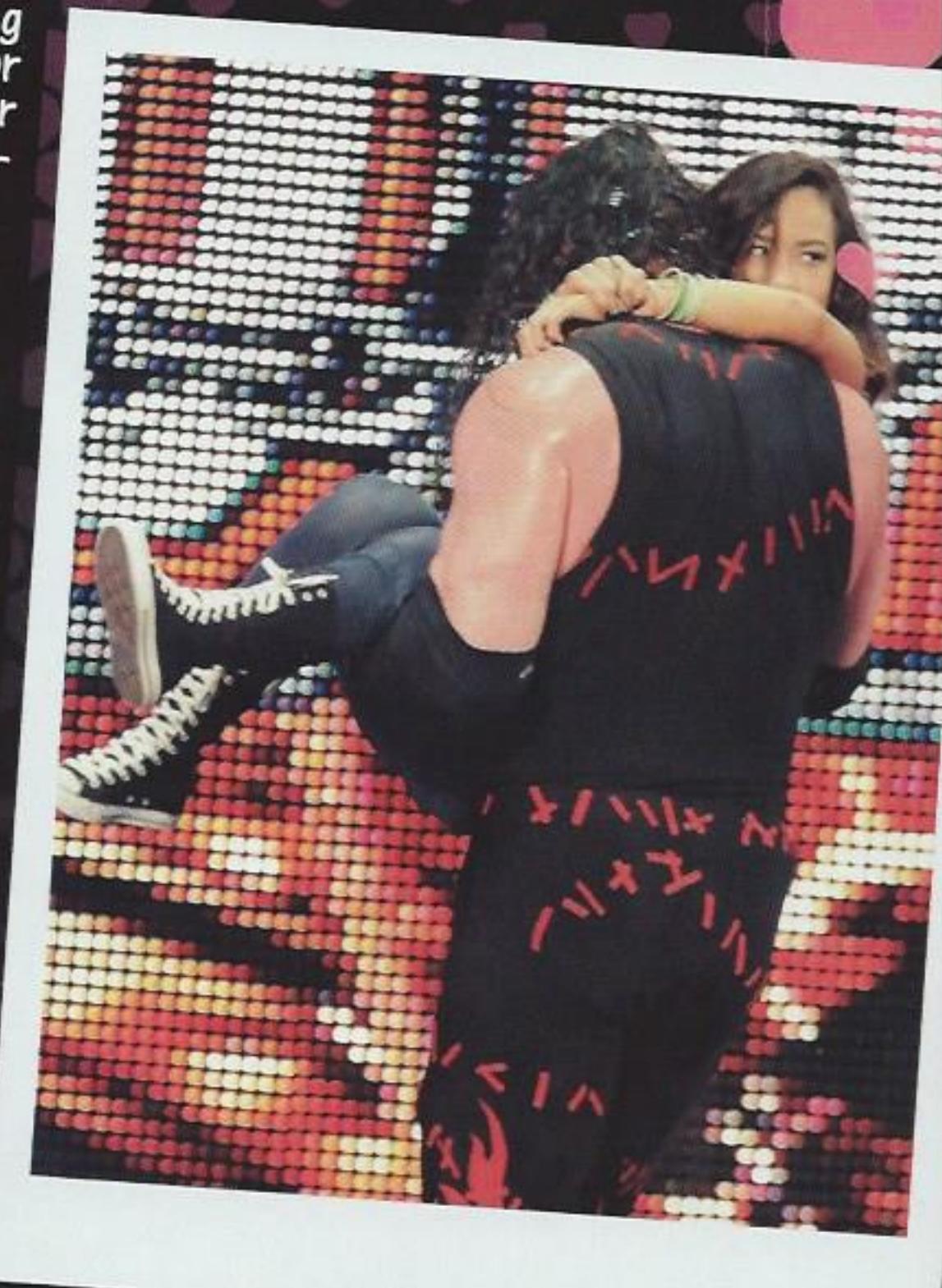
These Divas Are Here To Devour!

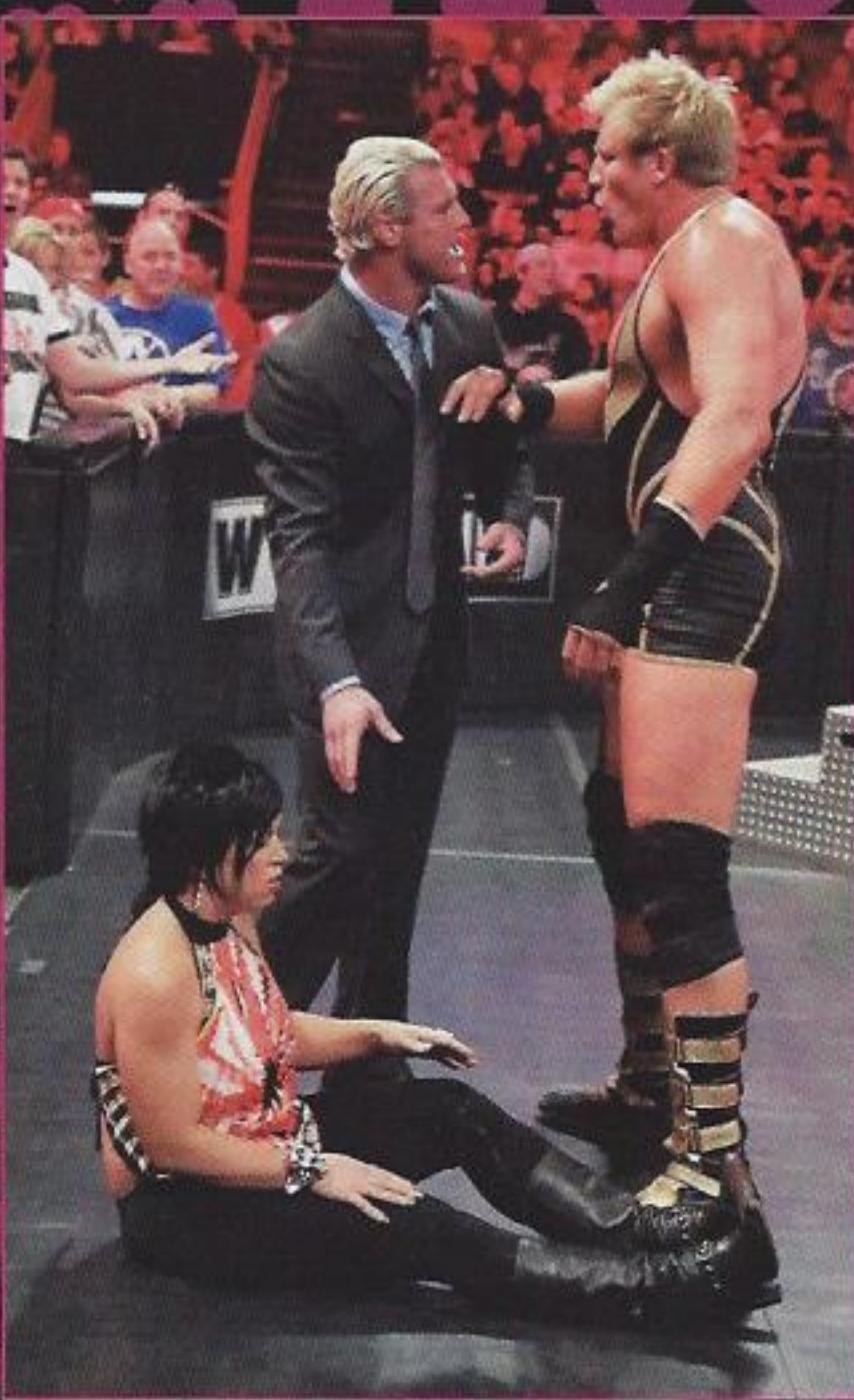
Daniel Bryan, Kane, Zack Ryder, Jack Swagger, and Teddy Long are only a few of their victims. For the women of WWE, it's in their best interest to betray—not befriend—the men in their lives

By Harry Burkett

DEILAH ORDERED HER manservant to shear Samson's locks, thereby sapping his remarkable strength, and turned him over to the Philistines for 1,100 pieces of silver. Cleopatra became a mistress of Roman emperor Julius Caesar, who subsequently dropped plans to invade Egypt and supported her as queen instead. Mata Hari used her prominence as an exotic dancer in Paris—and her relationships with several wealthy and influential men—to spy on France on behalf of Germany during World War I.

As history shows, WWE Divas are not the first ladies to use their wiles and beauty to advance their ambitions. Yet women such as Eve Torres, AJ Lee, and Vickie Guerrero are modern-day Sirens, alluring unsuspecting wrestlers with their sweet assurances and often causing once-promising careers to run aground amid the rocky shoals of unfulfilled potential and despair. While these women share common goals, each personifies a different, time-tested approach:





Guerrero masterfully manipulated Dolph Ziggler and Jack Swagger to the point where they didn't know what to think of her or each other. Whatever her end game, Vickie will doubtless rise from the seat of her pants.



Torres pleads with Kane to go easy on Zack Ryder. Obviously, Eve never gave a hoot about Zack. In the meantime, Kane always seems to be one whom the women target as a man who can unwittingly help them achieve their goals.

Photo by John Shanks

The Femme Fatale. It was all about Eve back in February, when she admitted to The Bella Twins that she didn't really like Zack Ryder (to whom she had been romantically linked in recent weeks), but was willing to use him to gain publicity for herself. She even planned to snare WWE's biggest star, John Cena, into her web of intrigue to boost her career further. Despite all the warning signs, Ryder was still tempted by Eve's forbidden fruit and allowed her to be in his corner during the Team Teddy vs. Team Johnny match at WrestleMania 28. She turned out to be the decisive factor, distracting Ryder and helping Raw General Manager John Laurinaitis gain control of the Smackdown brand.

Poor Zack. Unfortunately for him, Eve was the definition of a malevolent *femme fatale*, denying Zack her affection while driving him to the point of obsession and exhaustion, so much so that he was incapable of making rational decisions.

Laurinaitis rewarded Eve for her treachery, appointing her the executive administrator of Raw and Smackdown. She went on a spiteful power trip, firing The Bella Twins and inflaming the Big Show-Cena-Laurinaitis controversy. And when WWE Chairman and CEO Vince McMahon fired Laurinaitis, did she stand up for Big Johnny? No. Even now, she's plotting to regain the influence she enjoyed during the "People Power" regime.

The Crazy Chick. Only a few months ago, AJ seemed all-too-easy to understand. She appeared to be a throwback to Miss Elizabeth biting her nails at ringside, doing Randy Savage's bidding despite his abusive behavior. AJ was a far cry from the independent, strong-willed Divas that WWE tries to promote in the year 2012. The more Daniel Bryan humiliated AJ, the more she begged for his affection.

Now it seems that AJ might have been the master manipulator all along. Maybe her ill-timed kiss at WrestleMania 28, causing Bryan to lose the World heavyweight title to Sheamus in 18 seconds, was a kiss of death—a sweet revenge to deprive Bryan of what he coveted most. Then AJ aligned herself with CM Punk in the weeks leading up to his three-way WWE title defense against Bryan and Kane at No Way Out.

Yet AJ gave mixed signals. While AJ supported Punk, she also conveyed feelings for Bryan—so Punk couldn't be certain of AJ's loyalty. And, most bizarrely, she began flirting with Kane. She applied a liplock on the "Big Red Monster" on the June 11 edition of Raw, and, the following week, she pranced around the ring wearing a Kane mask.

Kane had spent a decade-and-a-half psyching out his foes ... and he was psyched out by a supposedly innocent girl! AJ is no doubt aware of Kane's ill-fated romances, which have included relationships with Katie Vick, Chyna, Tori (of X-Pac/Tori Christmas Story fame), and Lita.

Think this chick is crazy? She's crazy enough to be the talk of WWE. Well played, AJ.

The Predatory Cougar. Older and less aerobically fit than her Diva contemporaries, Vickie nonetheless makes the most of the charms she does possess. How does she do that? By preying on younger, insecure males with dreams of main-event stardom. She and Dolph Ziggler recently celebrated the second anniversary of their relationship, soon after Ziggler defeated stablemate Jack Swagger to become Vickie's sole client.

Nothing better illustrates Vickie's approach than the question she posed to Ziggler and Swagger before they faced each other on the June 18 edition of *Raw*: "Which one of you two truly deserves my admiration, my respect, and my affection?"

Vickie held out herself—not the WWE championship or the World heavyweight title—as the prize. For nearly a year, she had played Ziggler and Swagger against each other. This wouldn't have worked with WWE veterans, but two upstarts such as Ziggler and Swagger—both of whom have shown glimpses of greatness but no main-event staying power—are particularly susceptible to someone like Vickie, who compliments the remnants of her physical beauty with at least the appearance of confidence and wisdom.

Ziggler appeared to have "won" after defeating Swagger on *Raw*, but isn't it more accurate to say



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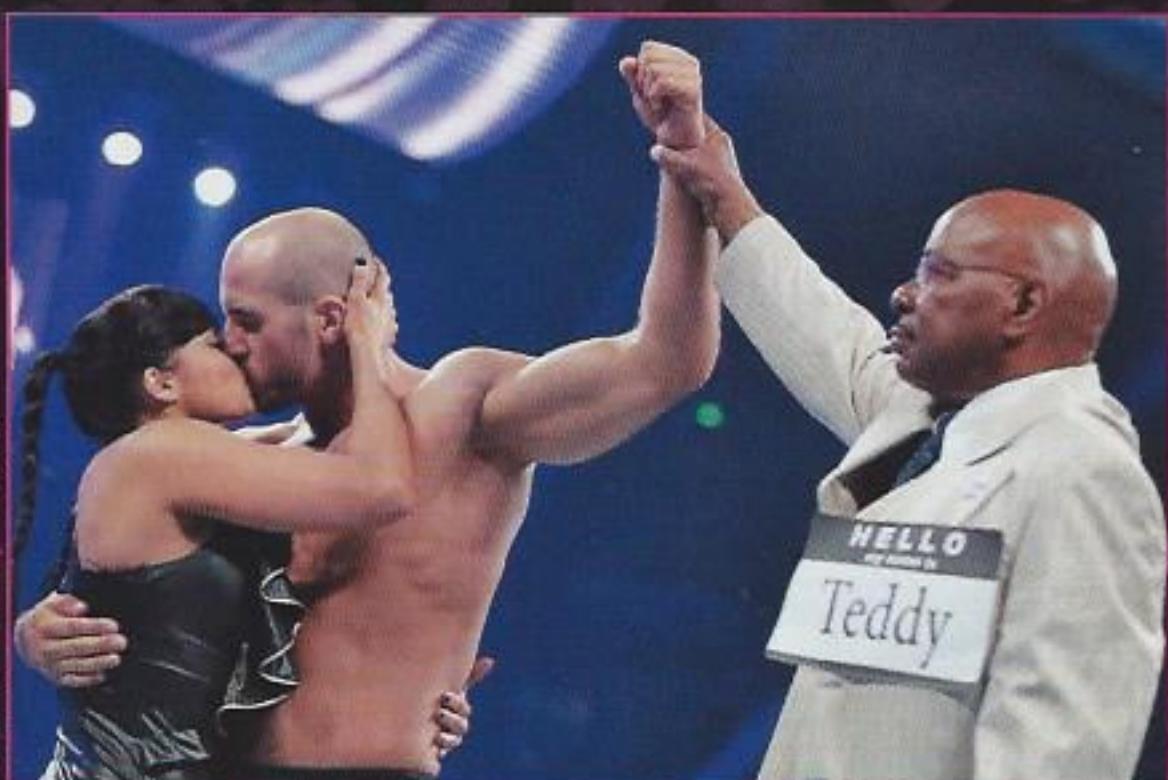
Daniel Bryan has repeatedly said "no, no, no" to AJ following their WrestleMania 28 debacle, but this is a woman who has a plan and will do anything to make that plan work. Beware, Danny boy!

that Swagger is the winner now that he is free of the cougar's clutches?

Is Any Man Safe? There are two types of Divas currently employed by WWE. Some have taken the more traditional route, faithfully plying their in-ring craft on *Raw* and *Smackdown*. Sadly, these Divas are likely to be relegated to Lumberjack matches and swimsuit competitions. But the truly clever Divas understand they must integrate themselves into male-dominated storylines. It's no longer good enough to be in supporting roles, as Miss Elizabeth and Sensational Sherri were in the classic WWF. The key to stardom is to become the dominant factor, a woman who can make a man's fortunes rise and fall at her whim. The greats of the past two decades—Sunny, Sable, Chyna, and Trish Stratus—did exactly that.

And there is no shortage of these vixens. Aksana employed the "From Russia With Love" strategy, first ingratiating herself to then-Smackdown GM Teddy Long, and, when he lost control of Smackdown to John Laurinaitis at WrestleMania, she quickly joined rising star Antonio Cesaro. Expect mainstays such as Layla, Alicia Fox, Natalya, and Tamina to work up some trouble for their male counterparts. Up-and-comers such as Kaitlyn, Raquel Diaz, and Sofia Cortez will likely follow the same model.

No man is safe. To quote good ol' J.R., some of these ladies truly are "Jezebels." □



Aksana used her feminine guile to coax Goldust into marriage, just so the Lithuanian beauty could remain in the U.S. More recently, she mowed through Teddy Long and into the arms of the fast-rising Antonio Cesaro.

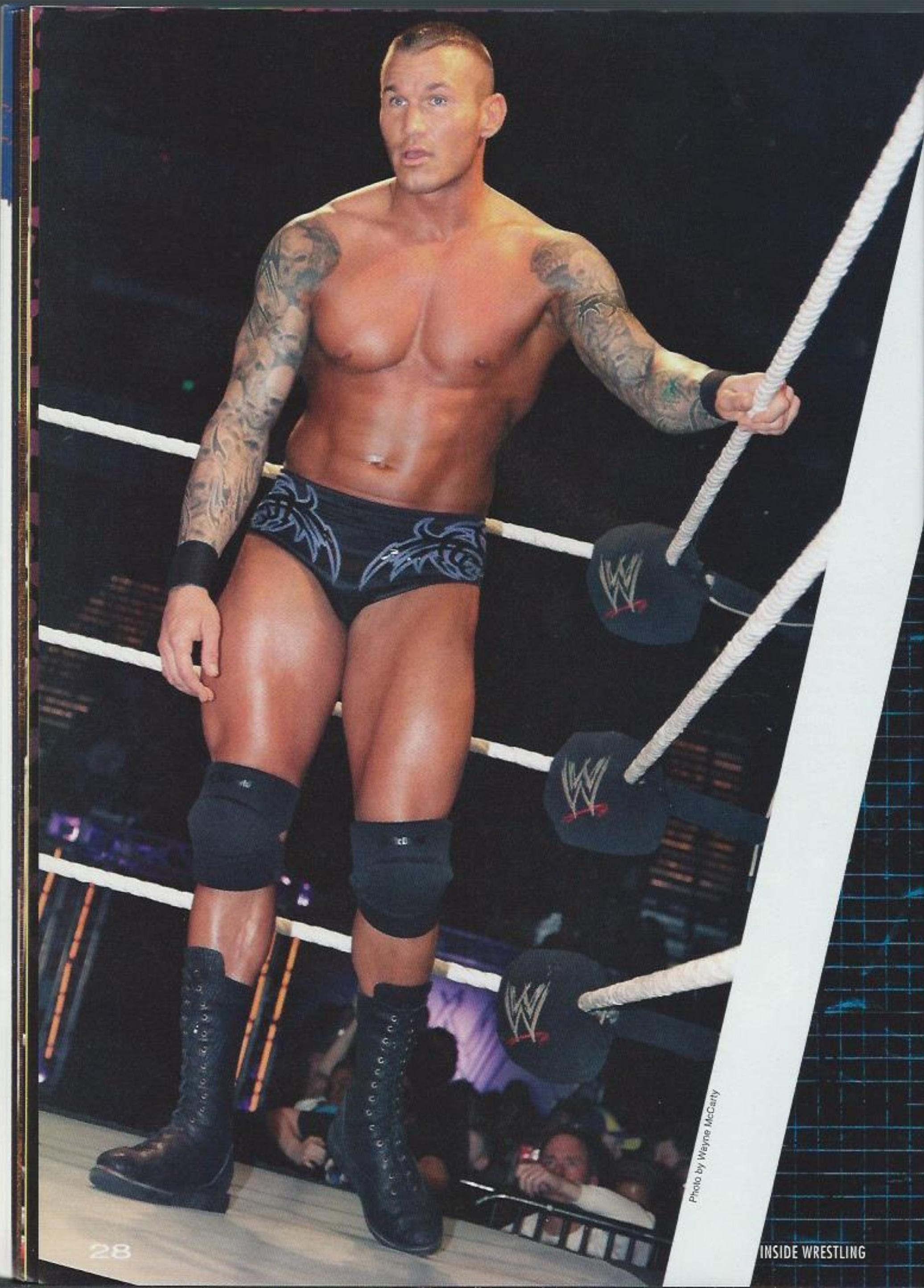
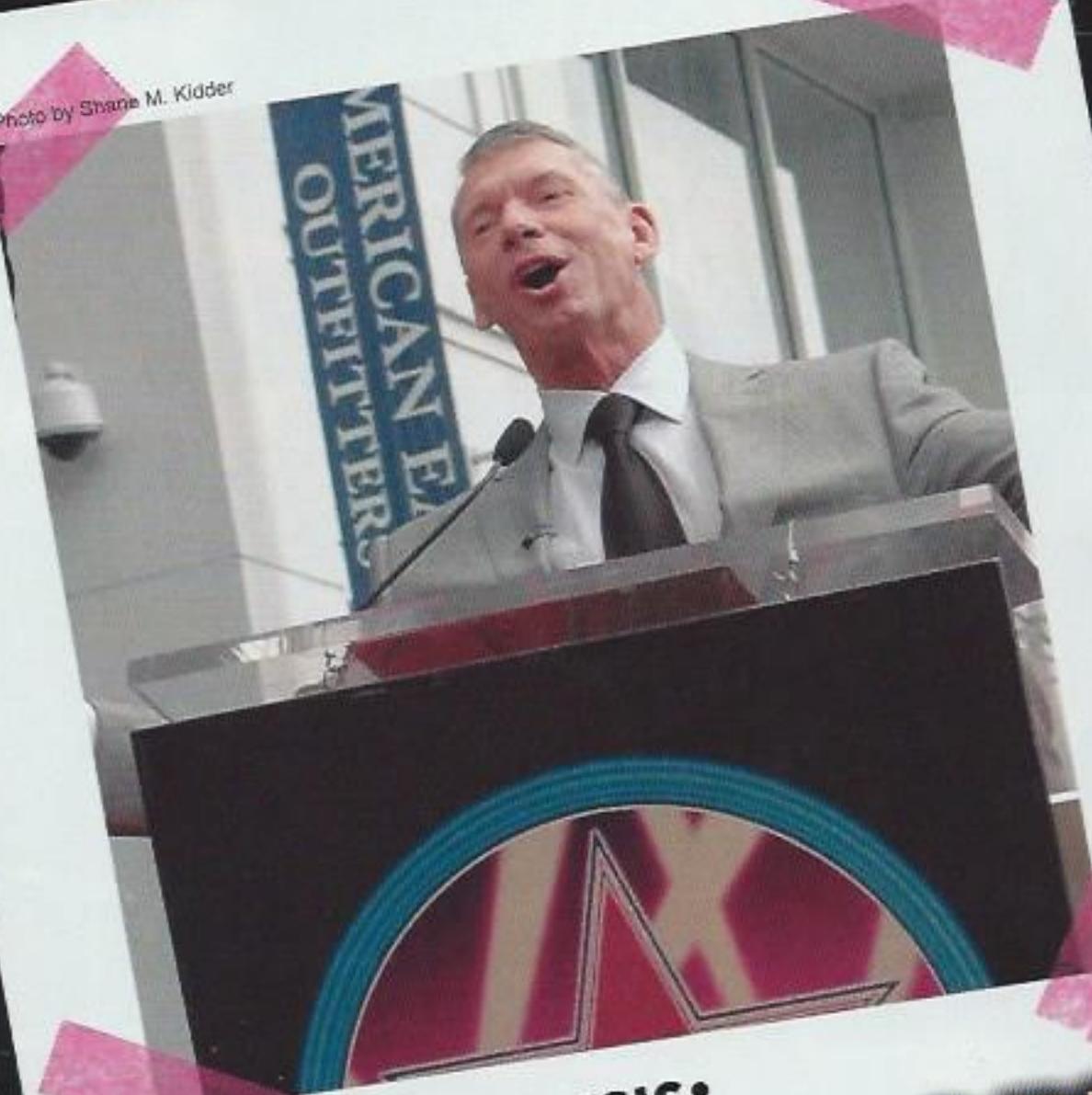


Photo by Wayne McCarty

Photo by Shane M. Kidder

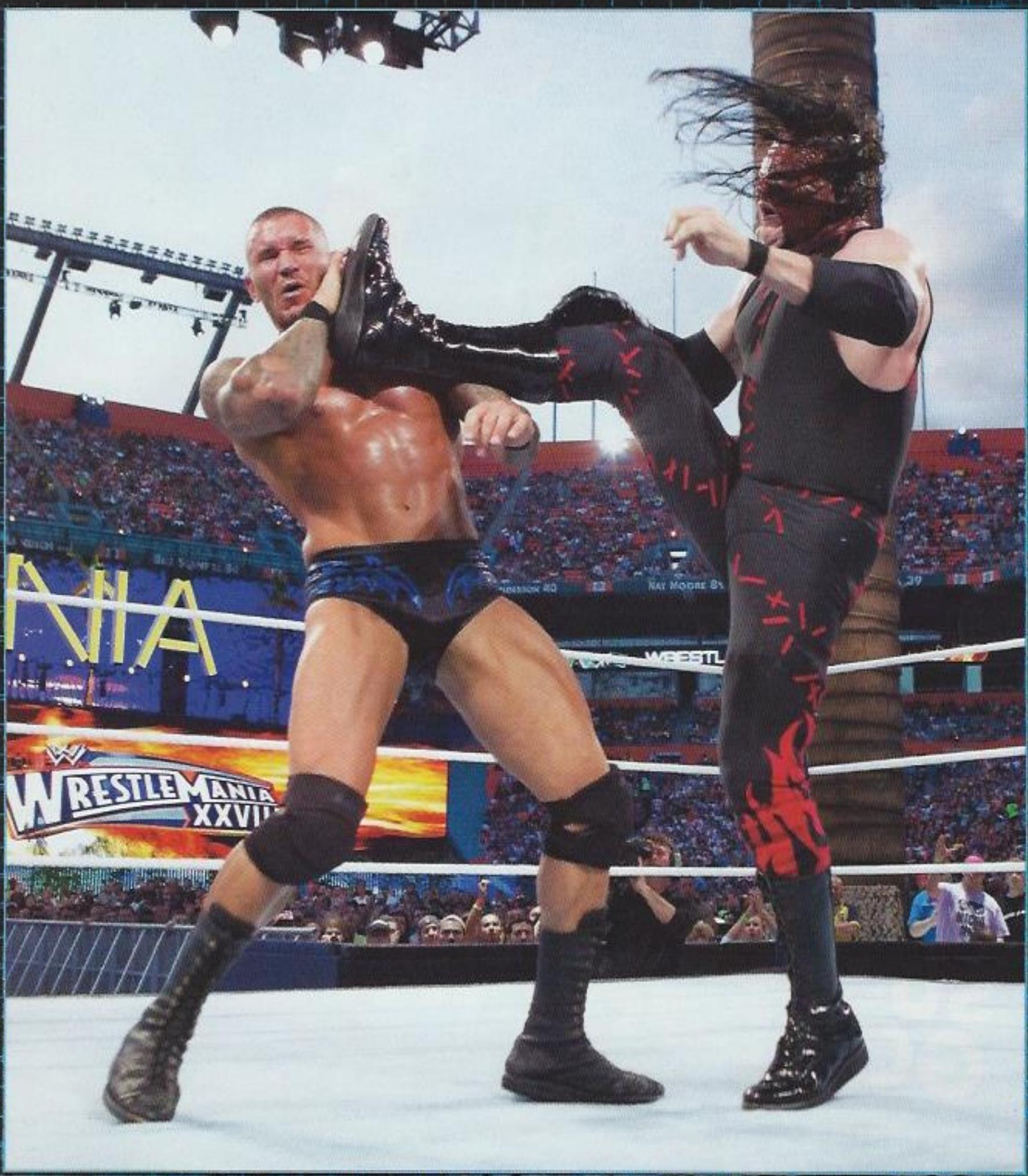


SPECIAL ANALYSIS:
**WAS RANDY ORTON'S
SUSPENSION
GOOD FOR WWE?**

On its face, Randy Orton's 60-day suspension for violating WWE's Wellness Policy a second time was an unfortunate occurrence that came at a bad time for the Smackdown brand. But there may be some intangible effects of the suspension that could prove to be a blessing to both "The Viper" and WWE

By Frank Krewda

If CIRCULATING RUMORS are true, WWE Chairman Vince McMahon was very angry with Randy Orton following his second violation of the WWE Wellness Policy. That's completely understandable, considering that Orton is depended on to bring revenue to the company far in excess of his seven-figure salary. But if McMahon can step back from being upset over the immediate ramifications of Orton's huge misstep, he may see that there are some intangible benefits to be reaped from the situation that may prove to be more valuable than two months of Orton's service.



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While Randy Orton didn't headline WrestleMania 28 with Kane, or even win this match, he remains a bona fide WWE main-event wrestler, and his 60-day suspension will affect WWE's bottom line. However, WWE still chose to sit him for a second Wellness Policy violation. It was a gutsy move for which the company should be applauded.

By the very nature of the wrestling business, WWE is under constant fire from critics, ranging from *New York Post* columnist Phil Mushnick to Linda McMahon's Republican senatorial opponent Chris Shays. Their argument against pro wrestling—and WWE in particular—is hinged on the horrific number of pro wrestlers who have died well before being eligible for Social Security.

When WWE instituted its Talent Wellness Program in 2006, the plan was met with skepticism. The general consensus from critics was that it was a cheap public relations ploy used to give the appearance that the company was concerned with the welfare of its talent, while at the same time turning a blind eye to the drug and alcohol use the policy was supposedly designed to prevent.



Photo by Diane Long

Like Orton, Rey Mysterio also carries two Wellness Policy violations around his neck. WWE critics openly wonder what will happen if either man commits a third violation.

Is that fair, though? Does the Wellness Program actually have teeth?

Putting a wrestler of Orton's stature on ice for two months at a time when Chris Jericho, Mark Henry, Wade Barrett, and Alberto Del Rio were gone from the Smackdown lineup for various reasons sends a strong message that WWE will not let star power—or anything else—stand in the way of enforcing its Wellness Policy.

eral shows. Merchandise sales and live attendance are bound to suffer to some degree, which affects WWE's bottom line.

However, the biggest difficulty for WWE may turn out to be figuring out how to best use Orton after his suspension expires. With two strikes against him, and a history of serious injuries, WWE must guard against the possibility of a third violation. Following a third violation, a WWE wrestler is subject

It is a message we at INSIDE WRESTLING hear loud and clear, and whether or not critics care to acknowledge the advances in the program, the fact is WWE is extremely serious about its enforcement and is continually ramping up its efforts to protect its most valuable commodities—the wrestlers themselves—from the temptation of harmful substances and behavior. For example, with the goal of eliminating cheating, WWE now requires its wrestlers to provide urine samples in full view of technicians. The company has also reduced the time between when it informs wrestlers they'll be tested and when the testing actually occurs.

While these advancements fly under the public radar, a 60-day suspension of a major star does not. Orton's suspension is troublesome for sure, but it does offer WWE a unique opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to looking after its wrestlers' well being. Suspending Orton raises the bar even higher because it demonstrates that no wrestler is above punishment for running afoul of the Wellness Policy.

With the build to SummerSlam 2012 about to kick off, and with the Smackdown roster at its thinnest state in months, WWE nevertheless accepted, head-on, the complications suspending Orton would entail. Certainly, storylines and cards will have to be adjusted, and one of its most bankable stars will miss sev-



Maven Huffman: A true WWE success story

WWE WELLNESS: NOT JUST FOR CURRENT STARS

Aside from crafting a comprehensive Wellness Policy for its active wrestlers in 2006, WWE, in 2007, instituted its Former Talent Rehabilitation Assistance Program, under which former WWE-contracted wrestlers can receive confidential substance abuse treatment, with WWE absorbing the costs.

Each year, WWE sends out several hundred letters to former wrestlers reminding them that the program is available should they want to use it.

We know of no other professional sports or entertainment company that offers such a generous service. But more importantly, the program works. Former *Tough Enough* winner Maven Huffman, who wrestled for WWE from 2001 to 2005, recently underwent WWE-sponsored treatment, and knows first-hand how effective the program can be.

"I owe my life to WWE for getting me through my ordeal," says Huffman, who sought treatment for a prescription pain pill addiction after being arrested and charged with illegally obtaining more than 1,000 pills in April. "Within minutes of my problem going public, I got a text from John Laurinaitis that said, 'Maven, we want to help you.'"

to termination and may not return to WWE before sitting out a minimum of one year. The onus, of course, is on Orton to stay clean for the remainder of his WWE career, but WWE shares some responsibility in helping him steer clear of a Strike-Three scenario.

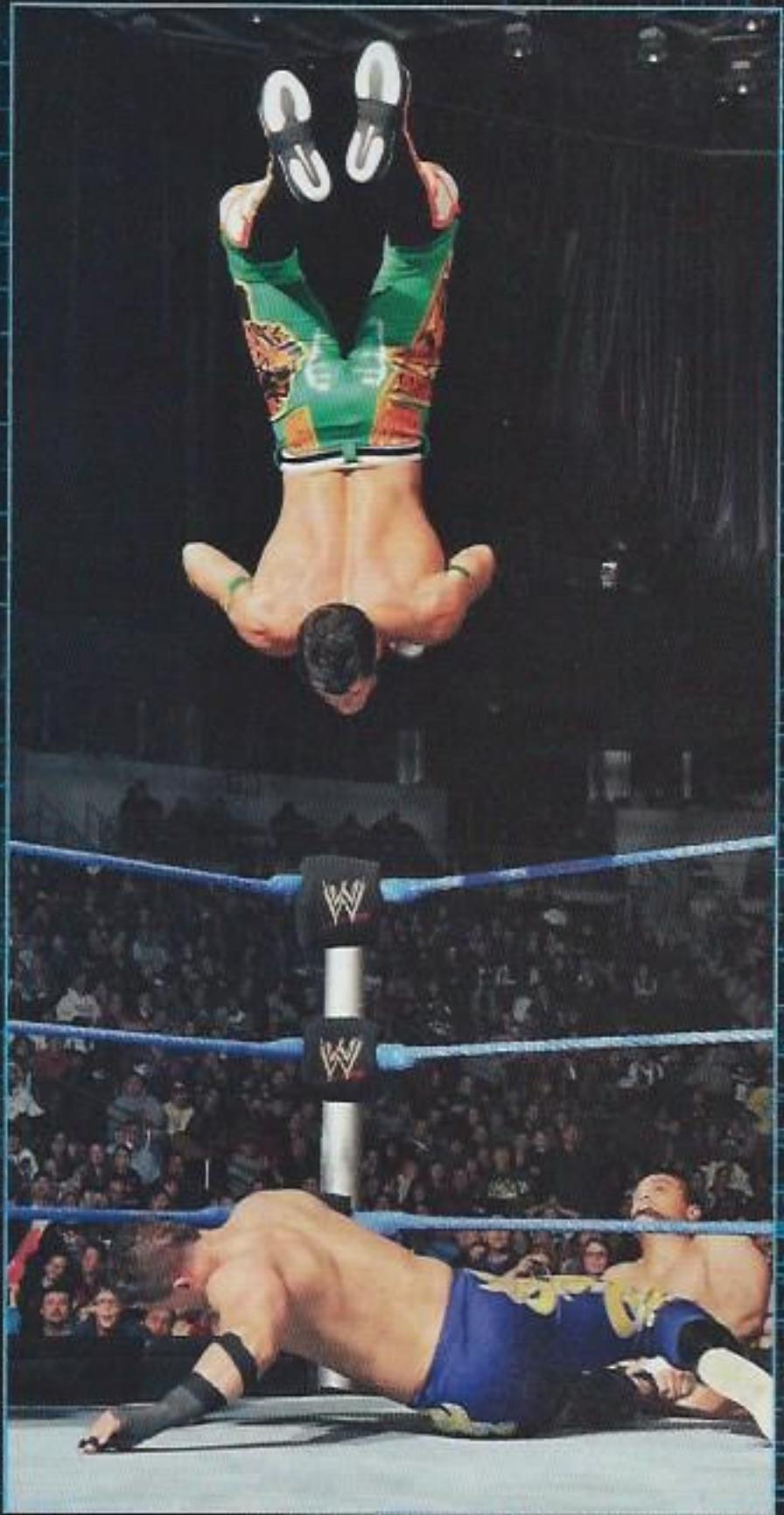
Obviously, that will be for WWE to figure out going forward, but some observers are still reluctant to commend the company at all for suspending Orton. The naysayers feel that only when WWE implements its Strike-Three punishment, in particular on a star of Orton's caliber, will the Wellness Program prove to be anything more than the company grandstanding for good publicity. There are currently five wrestlers on the WWE roster (Dolph Ziggler, Sin Cara, Darren Young, Heath Slater, and R-Truth) who have one violation on their record and four (Orton, Mysterio, William Regal, and Evan Bourne) who have two. We certainly don't want the company to have to prove its seriousness by having to fire any wrestler, but we also say that if WWE can help people get their lives back on

From there, WWE put Huffman in contact with an addiction specialist who had overcome the same addiction Maven was battling, and together they decided on the best course of action for getting him well. Huffman, who as of press time hadn't taken a pain pill in 72 days, says the one-on-one approach he received was essential to his treatment.

"The toughest part was re-teaching my brain," Maven explains. "You know, telling myself, *It's 10 a.m., you don't need a pain pill now*. Having that high level of personal contact with the specialist was critical to my recovery, because addiction is an hour-to-hour struggle, not just day-to-day. The specialist still calls me every week to see how I'm doing. From the very beginning of my rehab, I've been impressed by the personalized treatment I've received."

Now, at age 35, Huffman, who last wrestled in 2008 for the independent UWF promotion, says he can finally ponder a return to the ring, although he's still focused on conquering his addiction. "Wrestling again is something I think about every day of my life. But right now, I need to make sure I fix me first."

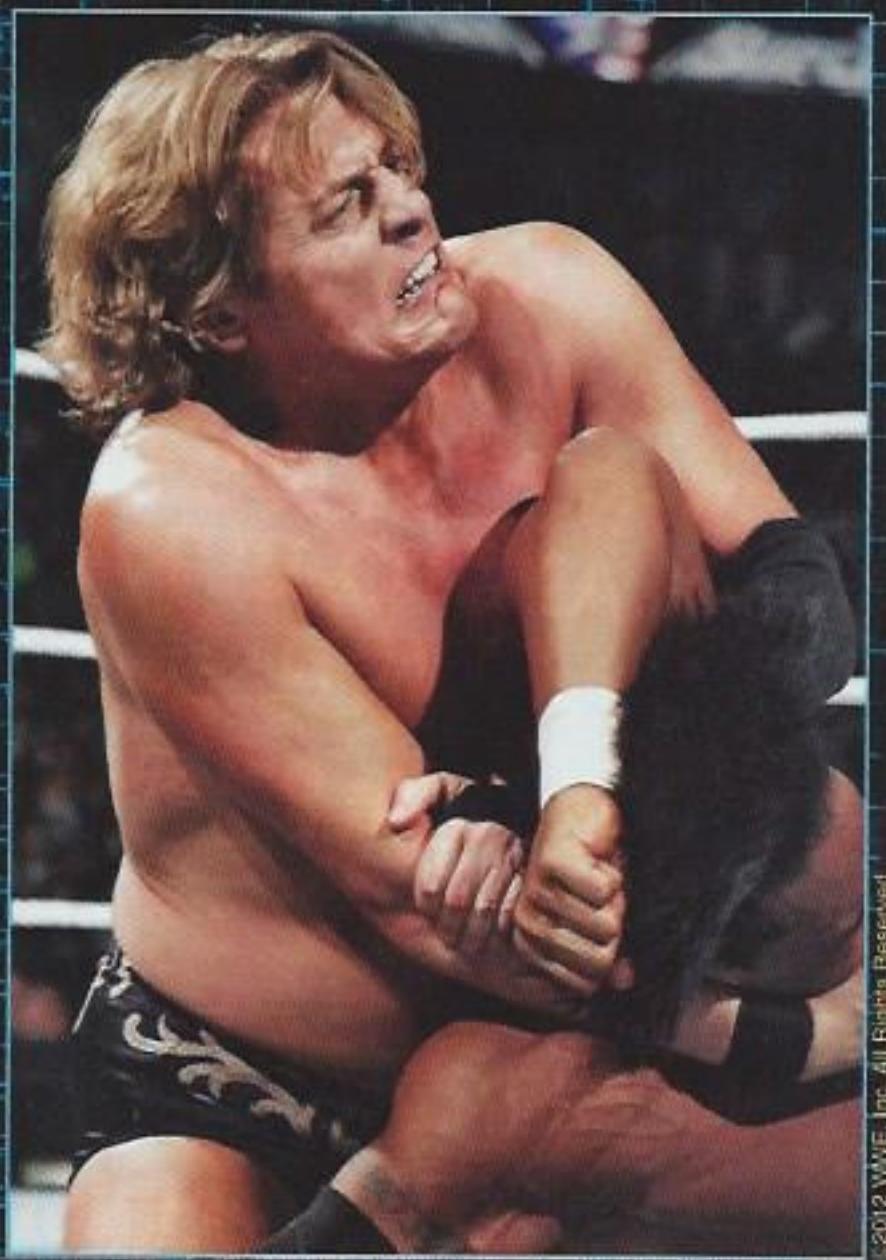
—Frank Krewda



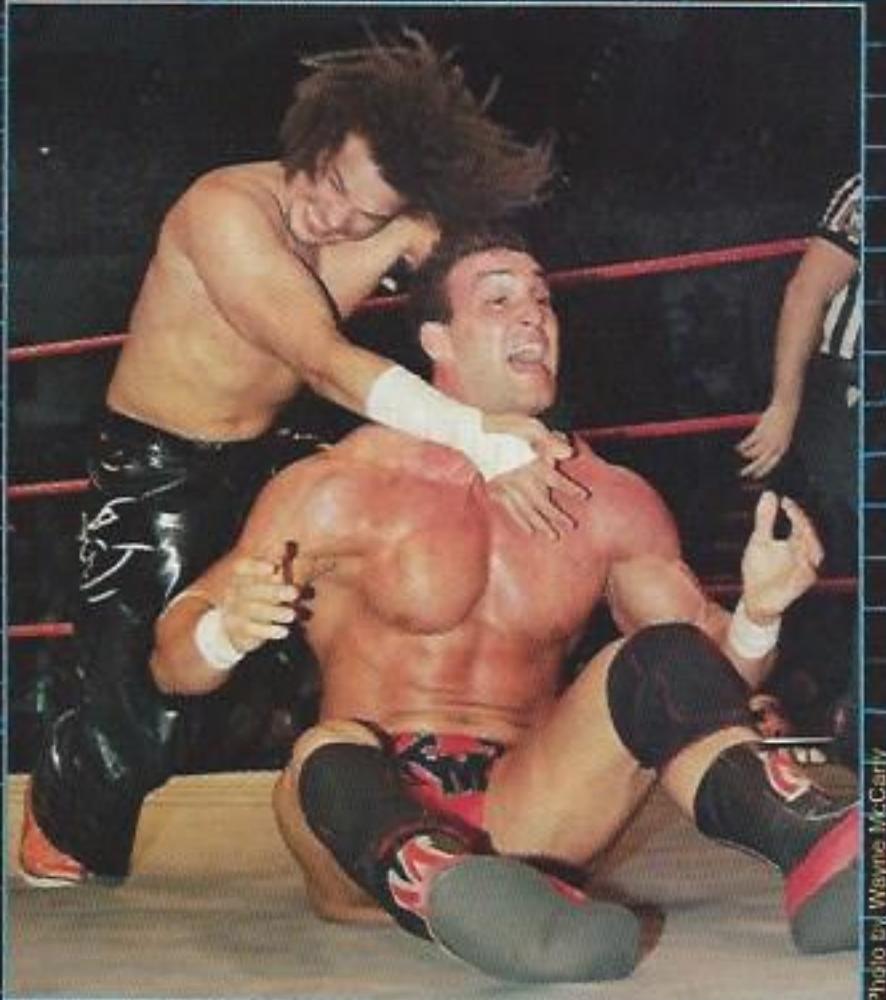
Evan Bourne suddenly found himself without a WWE tag team title belt after twice testing positive for Spice, a synthetic form of marijuana. Unlike Orton, who is a proven WWE commodity, Bourne might have done irreparable damage to his young WWE career.

track by conquering their addictions, the motivations don't matter as long as the outcome is positive.

Admittedly, we are not privy to internal WWE discussions when the company must make decisions on suspensions, terminations, or any other Wellness Policy matters, but we still recognize an opportunity when we see one. Therefore, we urge WWE to not look upon Orton's latest suspension as another step toward his termination, but rather as a rare opportunity to put its best foot forward in touting its Wellness Program. The benefits of seizing this opportunity could pay dividends long after Randy Orton wrestles his final match. □



William Regal has yet to return to a prominent role on Raw or Smackdown since violating the Wellness Policy a second time. The former King of the Ring and Raw GM is living proof that WWE isn't afraid to act when wrestlers violate their policy.



Carlito and Chris Masters were both released following their Wellness Program violations. If they ever do return to WWE, their previous infractions will remain on their record.

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Photo by Wayne McCary



RING OF DISHONOR!

KEVIN STEEN'S SICK PLAN TO RUIN ROH ... FOREVER

After Kyle O'Reilly's behavior at Best in the World 2012, it would seem being the ROH champion isn't enough for Kevin Steen. Now it appears he's looking to ensure the company a tumultuous future by turning its younger wrestlers against it

KYLE STEEN KYL



By Al Castle
Photos By Scott Finkelstein

WHEN DAVEY RICHARDS stepped into the ring in New York City's Manhattan Center to challenge for the ROH title at the Best In the World pay-per-view, he knew champion Kevin Steen had brought backup with him in the form of his sadistic lackeys, Jimmy Jacobs and Steve Corino.

But what Richards didn't know was that Steen may have recruited another henchman that would prove most valuable in defeating him—Kyle O'Reilly.

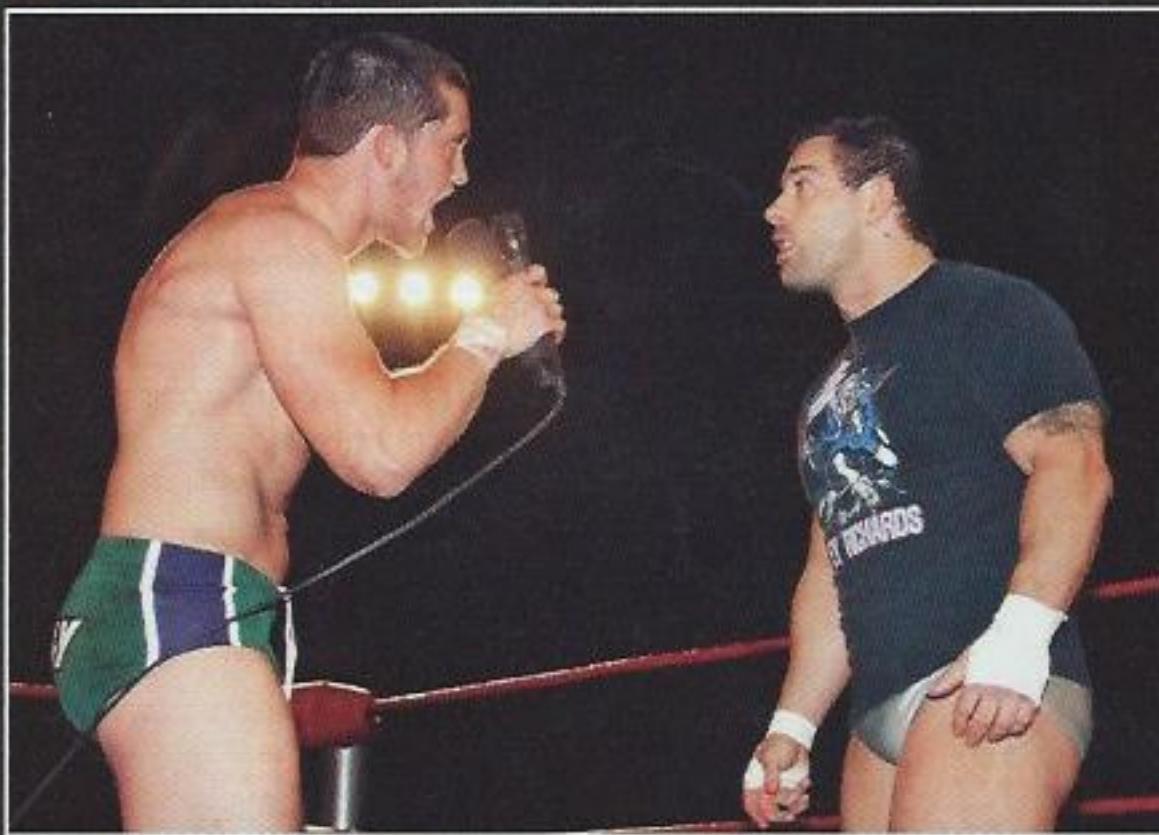
Although neither Steen nor O'Reilly would confirm an alliance, all evidence points to the Machiavellian titleholder getting inside the head of Richards' protégé. If true, it would mark another coup in Steen's ongoing war to destroy Ring of Honor from the top down.

"I'd like to think that Kyle is smarter than to take advice from that bloated idiot, but nothing would surprise me anymore," a dejected Richards said the day after losing the wild anything-goes brawl to Steen. "All I know is that the Kyle O'Reilly I've seen lately is not the same kid I took under my wing years ago. He's become a disrespectful punk—just like Steen."

Unquestionably, O'Reilly has undergone quite the metamorphosis since being hired by ROH in 2009 under the recommendation of Richards, who had helped train him. Upon his arrival, O'Reilly quickly formed a tag team with fellow ROH prospect Adam Cole. Future Shock, as they called themselves, quickly earned a reputation as one of the toughest and scrappiest tandems in ROH.

But the dissolution of another popular ROH tag team, The American Wolves, would ultimately result in Future Shock splitting up as well. Early in 2012, Cole and O'Reilly chose sides in the ongoing feud between Richards and Eddie Edwards. Cole formed an alliance with Edwards and O'Reilly joined with his mentor, Richards, to form Team Ambition.

In March, Cole and Edwards teamed to beat Richards and O'Reilly in the main event of ROH's 10th Anniversary Show in New York City. And although it was Richards who was pinned by Cole, nobody was more upset than O'Reilly, who stormed off after the match without congratulating Cole or Edwards.



Coincidentally—or not—O'Reilly's surprising show of disrespect would come just as Steen's malevolent influence in ROH began spreading like wildfire. Not only did Steen defeat Richards to win the ROH heavyweight title, but he also convinced Jacobs and Corino—two men who seemingly despised him just months earlier—to join him in mission to burn down everything that ROH stands for.

Then, at Best in the World on June 24, O'Reilly took on Cole in a brutal hybrid-rules match in which only a knockout, submission, or disqualification could decide the winner. Showing a brutality that he never exhibited before, O'Reilly punished his former partner with vicious strikes, even knocking out Cole's two front teeth. In the end, though, it was Cole who

At Best in the World 2012, Kyle O'Reilly was excessively brutal to former tag team partner Adam Cole in their hybrid rules match (above). Later in the show, O'Reilly unleashed an obscene harangue on his former mentor, Davey Richards (left), prior to his main-event title match against Kevin Steen. The shift in O'Reilly's attitude has been stunning, and many believe Steen is behind it.

would be victorious. And when Cole reached out to shake O'Reilly's hand after the match, he was answered with a slap in the face.

Later that night, just before Richards was about to face Steen, O'Reilly appeared at ringside to deliver a curse-filled tirade against his former mentor and the ROH fans. The vulgar display served to distract Richards at the outset of what was billed as his final ROH title match ever. And, sure enough, Richards went on to lose.

Unbridled violence? Blatant disrespect for a fellow competitor? Playing mind games with lockerroom leader Davey Richards? O'Reilly's transformation would appear to have Steen's fingerprints all over it. But O'Reilly has chosen to remain mum on the issue.

"Who I choose as my friends is nobody's business. But God knows I could use new ones," O'Reilly said. "I'm tired of following suckers like Adam and Davey. What kind of fool spends 15 minutes beating up another guy, then wants to shake his hand? I'm done with that kind of nonsense."

Steen, too, refused to tip his hand on whether he's been in O'Reilly's ear.

"If you follow my career, you know I answer to nobody—and that includes know-nothing wrestling magazine reporters," Steen said when asked whether he had a hand in O'Reilly's recent antics. "But I'll tell you this much. There are a lot of young guys in the back who are getting wise to what I've been saying about this company for the past year. They're sick and tired of hypocrites like Davey Richards, Jim Cornette, and all those sheep sitting in the crowd. They want a little honesty, and that's what I represent. The hell with Ring of Honor," the champ added boldly. "This is Ring of Steen."

As farfetched as Steen's mission of destroying ROH may seem, those in control of the company are taking him deadly serious. And if Steen can brainwash wrestlers like O'Reilly, who represent the future of the company, then Steen may not be too far away from achieving his goal. The last thing ROH needs is a roster full of Steen acolytes carrying on his tradition of disrespect and chaos in the years to come.

"This company was built over the past 10 years on a foundation of respect and honor. And Steen continues to chip away at that foundation," said Jim Cornette, the company's executive producer. "He's twice defeated Davey Richards—a warrior who personifies everything ROH stands for. He's wearing



As expected, Steen had Steve Corino and Jimmy Jacobs on hand to watch his back at Best in the World 2012. ROH officials feel they can handle these three, but fear that Steen is now attempting to turn the younger wrestlers against the company.

our most valuable championship. And, what's worse, he's even got fans cheering for him. If he can convince talented young wrestlers like Kyle O'Reilly to follow him, who knows what's next. Still, there's no reason to start to panic."

Sounds like he already has. □



The match between Steen and Richards amounted to a brawl, which favored the champion (above), who capitalized on the company's decision to make the package piledriver legal for the match (right).

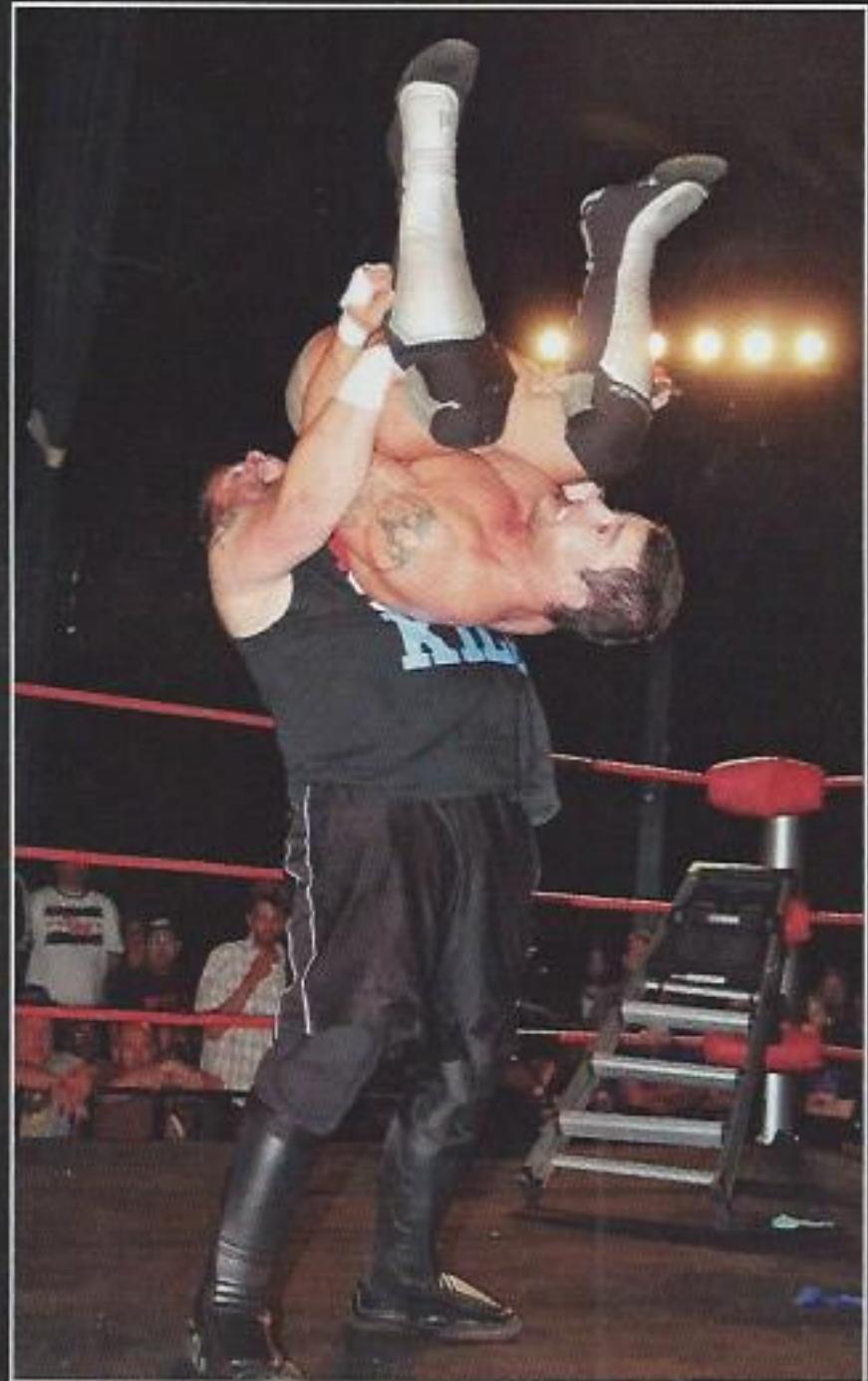


Photo by George Napolitano

38

INSIDE WRESTLING



MIZZER IN GOOD COMPANY

A Steep Fall From Number One In The
“PWI 500” Isn’t Unique To The 2011 Winner

ONLY SEVEN WRESTLERS IN THE 21-YEAR HISTORY OF THE “PWI 500” HAVE FALLEN OUT OF THE TOP 10 AFTER FINISHING NUMBER ONE THE YEAR BEFORE. THE MIZ WILL LIKELY BE ADDED TO THAT LIST, BUT AT LEAST HE’S IN GOOD COMPANY

By Stu Saks

SHORTLY AFTER THIS writing, a group of writers and editors will sit down and, for the 22nd time, compile the “PWI 500.” We have no idea at this point how things will shape up, but we can be fairly certain of one thing: The Miz is not going to join the Elite Three—Bret Hart (1993-94), Steve Austin (1998-99), and John Cena (2006-2007)—as a back-to-back winner.

To say that The Miz had a miserable year would not only be a bad play on words, but a major understatement. While he is still extremely competitive, very few (perhaps himself included) still have any expectations of success for the for-

mer WWE champion when he steps between the ropes. Unfortunately for The Miz (and for PWI), his descent began around this time last year, shortly before the decision was made that, based on his accomplishments during the period of June 1, 2010, through May 31, 2011, he was deserving of “PWI 500’s” number-one slot.

His slide from the precipice was expected, but few could have predicted that it would be so severe. It’s a fair bet that The Miz’ fall in the “500” will be the steepest ever.

Let’s take a peek at some of his predecessors for this dubious honor:

DEAN MALENKO

1 IN 1997; 35 IN 1998

Malenko was easily the most controversial number-one selection in the 21-year history of the "500." He had a good year in 2007, winning the WCW cruiserweight title twice, from Rey Mysterio Jr. and Ultimo Dragon, but such accomplishments are usually not enough to merit the top spot. 1997 was an odd year in this sport's history, however, as no one wrestler really stood out.

That being the case, *PWI* broke from its traditional set of criteria and, for the first (and only) time, made the decision that number-one position would go to the man who was the best technical wrestler. That man was Malenko, "The Man Of A Thousand Holds."

Malenko, a talented mid-carder at best, had a mediocre follow-up year, the lowlight of which was losing the cruiserweight title to Chris Jericho and then packing his bags and leaving WCW for two months to lick his wounds. He'd return to moderate success, but his position in the "500" would be assumed by a man who not long before had also been a WCW mid-carder but had taken over the sport in the WWF—*"Stone-Cold"* Steve Austin.

Malenko was fortunate to finish in the top 40.

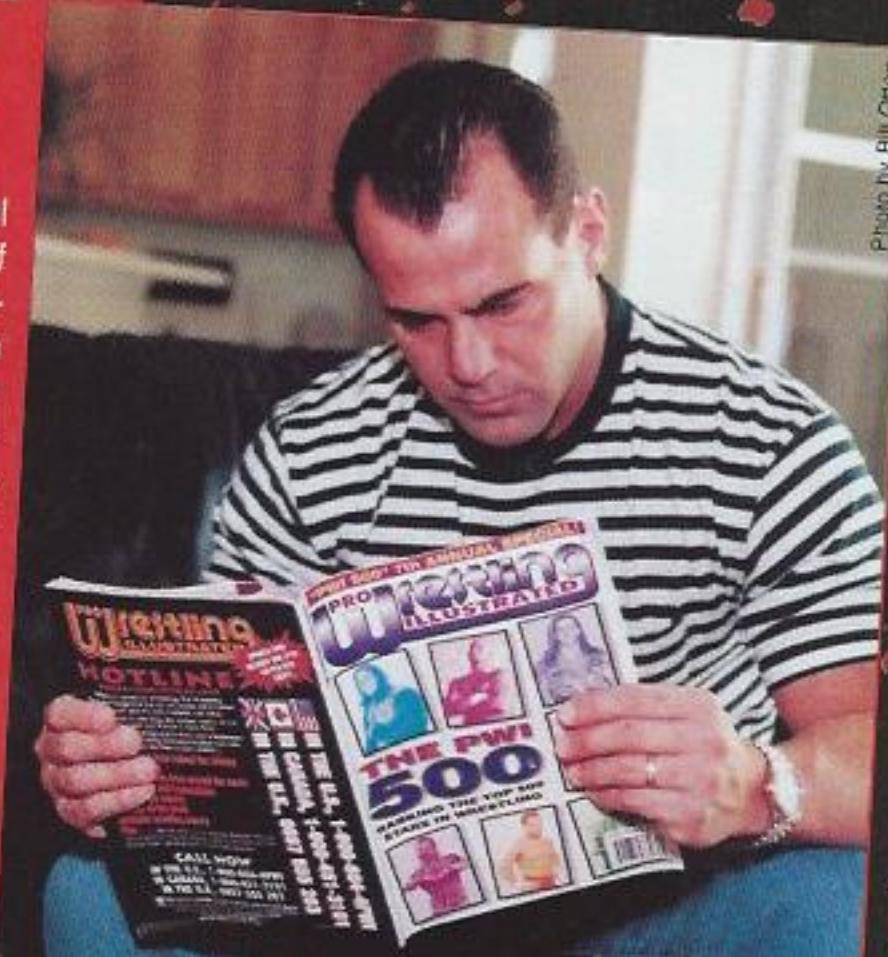
AJ STYLES

1 IN 2010; 24 IN 2011

Styles was the first and only wrestler contracted to a company other than WWE or WCW to be selected to the top spot. While there were some fans who, being unfamiliar with his work in TNA, chided us for the selection, most recognized that Styles is a once-in-a-lifetime talent who was finally given a chance to shine for a sustained period in the latter part of 2009 and into 2010.

Styles began what at the time was the longest TNA World title reign ever—211 days—in September 2009 with a victory in a five-way that included Kurt Angle, Sting, Matt Morgan, and Hernandez. He had a series of impressive defenses, but had lost the title to Rob Van Dam before the release of the issue announcing his selection as number one. And, as happened to Miz this past year, he went into a bit of a funk.

Styles was not helped much by a confused psyche that had him miscast as a stylin', profilin' Ric Flair wannabe. As a member of the rule-breaking Fortune, with Flair, Kazarian, Bobby Roode,



Dean Malenko (above) and AJ Styles (below) briefly got to the months that followed. Malenko never cracked the top 20 after that; Styles is expected to be a lot more fortunate.



and James Storm, his personal fortunes changed considerably for the worse. His follow-up ranking in the "PWI 500" was reflective of the first prolonged slump of his TNA career.

BATISTA

1 IN 2005, 23 IN 2006

Unlike in 1997, when Malenko grabbed the top spot by default, an argument could be made for any one of five men in 2005: Batista, John Cena, Satoshi Kojima, Triple-H, and John Bradshaw Layfield. That he was the man chosen, especially after a career-best 20 the year before, speaks volumes of how far Batista's career had come in such a short period of time.

Batista's biggest moment of the year came on the biggest stage, when he pinned former Evolution stablemate Triple-H for the WWE World title at WrestleMania 21. He successfully defended the title against HHH in a Hell in the Cell match at Vengeance. Additionally, he won The Royal Rumble to earn his WrestleMania opportunity.

Injuries stymied Batista's momentum the following year. He tearfully relinquished the World title during a *Smackdown* taping after tearing a triceps muscle. Batista did manage to squeeze in a two-week run as tag team champion with his little buddy, Rey Mysterio Jr., after dethroning MNM, but a year that had started with such hope was soured by physical ailments, which would be a career pattern until his retirement in 2010.



Photo by George Napolitano
Batista exults in his World title victory over Triple-H at WrestleMania 21. Plagued by injuries in 2006, Batista wrestled often enough to be ranked in the "500," but not enough to finish near the top.



The culmination of years of hard work for Shawn Michaels came at WrestleMania 12, when he beat Bret Hart for the WWF World title. He may not have been ready for the rigors and demands of being the face of the company, and experienced a miserable follow-up year.

SHAWN MICHAELS

1 IN 1996; 18 IN 1997

As brilliant a wrestler as Michaels was, it's almost unfathomable to consider that it took him 13 years to win his first world title. But when you consider the fact that he was a tag team wrestler for much of his early career and that men of his size weren't granted many opportunities to wrestle for the WWF World title, it stands to reason. When he beat Bret Hart for the title, at WrestleMania 12 no less, it was a very emotional moment for the "Heartbreak Kid."

Also in 2006, Michaels won his second consecutive Royal Rumble and scored huge pay-per-view wins over former bodyguard Diesel (Kevin Nash) and Davey Boy Smith.

He was primed for a great 1997, but injuries and attitude issues plagued most of his year. Though he ended his career as a beloved figure, he was heartily booed by the fans at Madison Square Garden before the match in which he lost the WWF title to Sid Vicious.

Shawn Michaels came in 18th in a year when Dean Malenko came in first. At least The Miz can presumably look at this year's winner and take solace in the fact that no matter what he did, he probably wasn't going to win anyway. □

editors' roundtable

"I feel WWE is saying, 'We'll just advance our storylines as we see fit. We're WWE, the fans will accept what we give them, even if we contradict what we did months ago.' It is a very arrogant approach in my opinion."

—Brady Hicks

WWE must do a more credible job of executing and resolving storylines

ON JUNE 11, 2007, Vince McMahon got into his limousine at the conclusion of *Raw*, only to have the vehicle explode as the show faded to black. The storyline suggested that the WWE chairman perished in the conflagration. Three weeks later, though, in what was planned to be a memo-

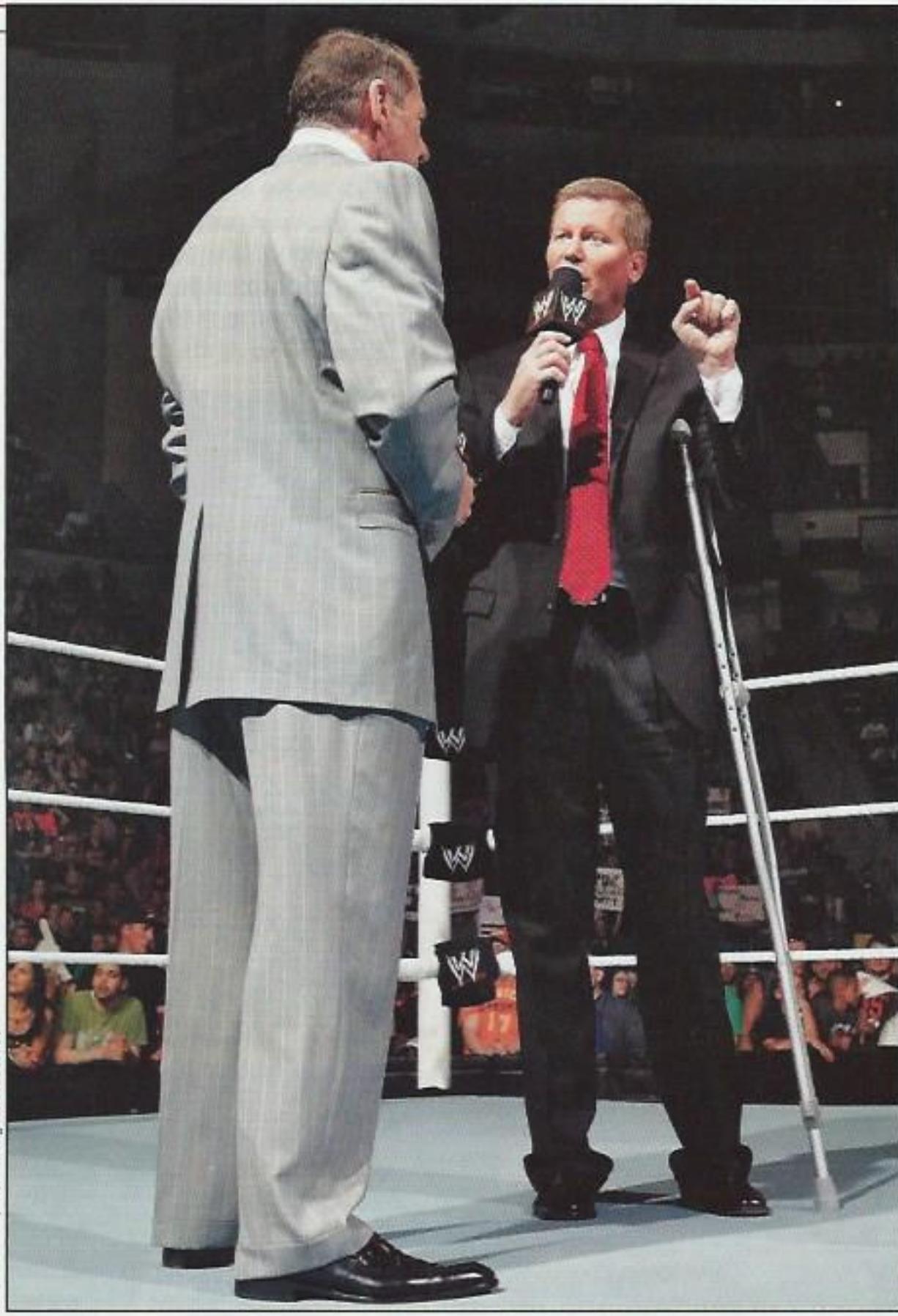
rial show in Vince's honor, the company was forced to abandon the storyline after Chris Benoit and his wife and son were found dead in their Georgia home.

As McMahon stood in the ring to address this real-life tragedy (he wouldn't learn the horrific details until the following day), no mention was made of the angle



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After settling into a limo that would explode and "kill" Vince McMahon on *Raw* in 2007, WWE was forced to ditch the storyline after the Chris Benoit tragedy. Of course, prolonging the angle in light of Benoit's double-murder-suicide would've have been in poor taste. But, absent such horrific circumstances, WWE must do a better job of concluding their storylines in a credible way.



After being removed from power by the WWE Board of Directors in Summer 2011, Vince McMahon returned in Summer 2012 to give John Laurinaitis a job evaluation. As one of our astute readers pointed out, WWE never explained how McMahon regained the authority to perform such a task.

WWE had initiated just a few weeks before, and the storyline of Vince's death faded away, never to be revisited.

This is an extreme, but understandable, example of WWE failing to conclude a major storyline. And given the circumstances of the Benoit case, WWE was forgiven for ditching the angle in mid-stream. But there have since

been instances in which WWE has allowed major storylines to die on the vine. Certainly, WWE reserves the right to alter its plans on the fly, but when the company ignores or contradicts logic and its own actions, wrestling fans are left hanging.

They've invested time, emotions, and, to some extent, money in the WWE product, only to be

denied a logical resolution. For WWE to believe its fans will either accept or not notice lapses in logic or fact borders on arrogance. As attracting and keeping loyal fans becomes ever more difficult in our tough economic times, frustrating or insulting fans in this way is risky business, even for WWE.

To discuss how WWE might improve in this area, Publisher Stu Saks, Editor-in-Chief Frank Krewda, Senior Writer Harry Burkett, and Contributing Writer Brady Hicks gathered for a roundtable discussion.

STU SAKS: Good morning, guys. Thanks for coming in this morning. What prompted me to call this meeting was a recent letter we received from a reader. In it, he asked how Vince McMahon even has the authority to give John Laurinaitis a job performance review on *Raw* when the WWE Board of Directors removed McMahon from power last summer? *Excellent question*, I thought after reading it. *How can WWE just ignore its own history? If we're expected to follow their storylines, at least have the decency not to insult my intelligence*. Am I overreacting?

HARRY BURKETT: Not at all, Stu. I've always thought the deal was that we allow ourselves to get wrapped up in storylines so that we're rewarded with an emotional payoff at some point.

FRANK KREWDA: Remember, guys, this is the same company that recently advertised its debut tour of Brazil after insisting for decades that two of its major

"I think WWE fans at some point must start holding the company accountable. I'm not calling for the fans to stop attending shows or purchasing pay-per-views, but there are ways for the fans to get their message across to the powers-that-be."

—Harry Burkett

titles were established in tournaments held in Rio de Janeiro. That said, I agree, Stu, assuming your fans won't notice inconsistencies is very insulting. You are not over-reacting at all.

BRADY HICKS: And don't forget about the anonymous Raw GM storyline that was never resolved ... It's one thing to suspend disbelief, but asking fans to just ignore glaring contradictions is too much.

SAKS: Brady, do you feel WWE is, in fact, asking fans to ignore contradictions or that the company is gambling on the idea that their fans won't even notice?

HICKS: Actually, I feel WWE is saying, "We'll just advance our storylines as we see fit. We're WWE, the fans will accept what we give them, even if we contradict what we did months ago." It is a very arrogant approach in my opinion.

KREWDA: And, again, a very



Photo by George Napolitano

Triple-H bounces from WWE exec to active competitor to WWE official on a whim. Perhaps WWE fans would embrace Triple-H and the storylines he's involved in even more if WWE defined his role within the company more precisely.

insulting approach, because it presumes wrestling fans are too stupid or lazy to realize when they're being played.

HICKS: Yet, even if WWE is their favorite promotion, or the most dominant promotion in the world, I think there's a point when even WWE diehards will say, "This is ridiculous, and I've had enough."

BURKETT: I hear what you're saying, Brady. But I have to disagree. Spend 10 minutes in a wrestling chat room browsing comments and you can see that loyalties are broken down very much by brand. It seems many WWE fans don't want to even know about TNA or ROH, the indies even less.

KREWDA: That's true, Harry, but I have to wonder how strong that loyalty will remain if WWE doesn't start paying more attention to detail.

BURKETT: I'd guess until TNA or Ring of Honor establishes themselves as legitimate alternatives to WWE.

SAKS: Yes, but as we're seeing, that could take quite a while. In the meantime, what must WWE do to improve in this area? And please don't tell me they need to write more logical storylines and pay closer attention to detail. Those are obvious answers.

KREWDA: Okay, then at the risk of sounding intellectually lazy, Stu, I have to say those are precisely the things WWE needs to do. Really, it's a very easy fix. If WWE wants fans to buy into its storylines, they need to be more logical and engaging. And they must come to a clear and full conclusion. Period.

BURKETT: I agree that that really is what it all boils down to, Stu. Looking back, how hard would it have been for Creative to write in an explanation of how Vince re-acquired power after being dismissed last year? How hard would it have been to come up with a reasonable resolution as to who was behind all those

annoying e-mail interruptions on Raw? Granted, they seem like small details, but the fans deserve an explanation. As a consumer, I feel WWE owes it to me to create only the best storylines at all times, and frankly, when even the tiniest detail is left open-ended, I feel cheated.

SAKS: I can certainly see how you'd feel that way, Harry. Neglecting details suggests laziness and complacency on the part of any promotion, not just WWE.

BURKETT: It sure does. And I think WWE fans at some point must start holding the company accountable. I'm not calling for the fans to stop attending shows or purchasing pay-per-views, but there are ways for the fans to get their message across to the powers-that-be.

SAKS: Such as writing a letter to the editor of INSIDE WRESTLING, which is what initiated this very spirited conversation. Thank you, guys. □

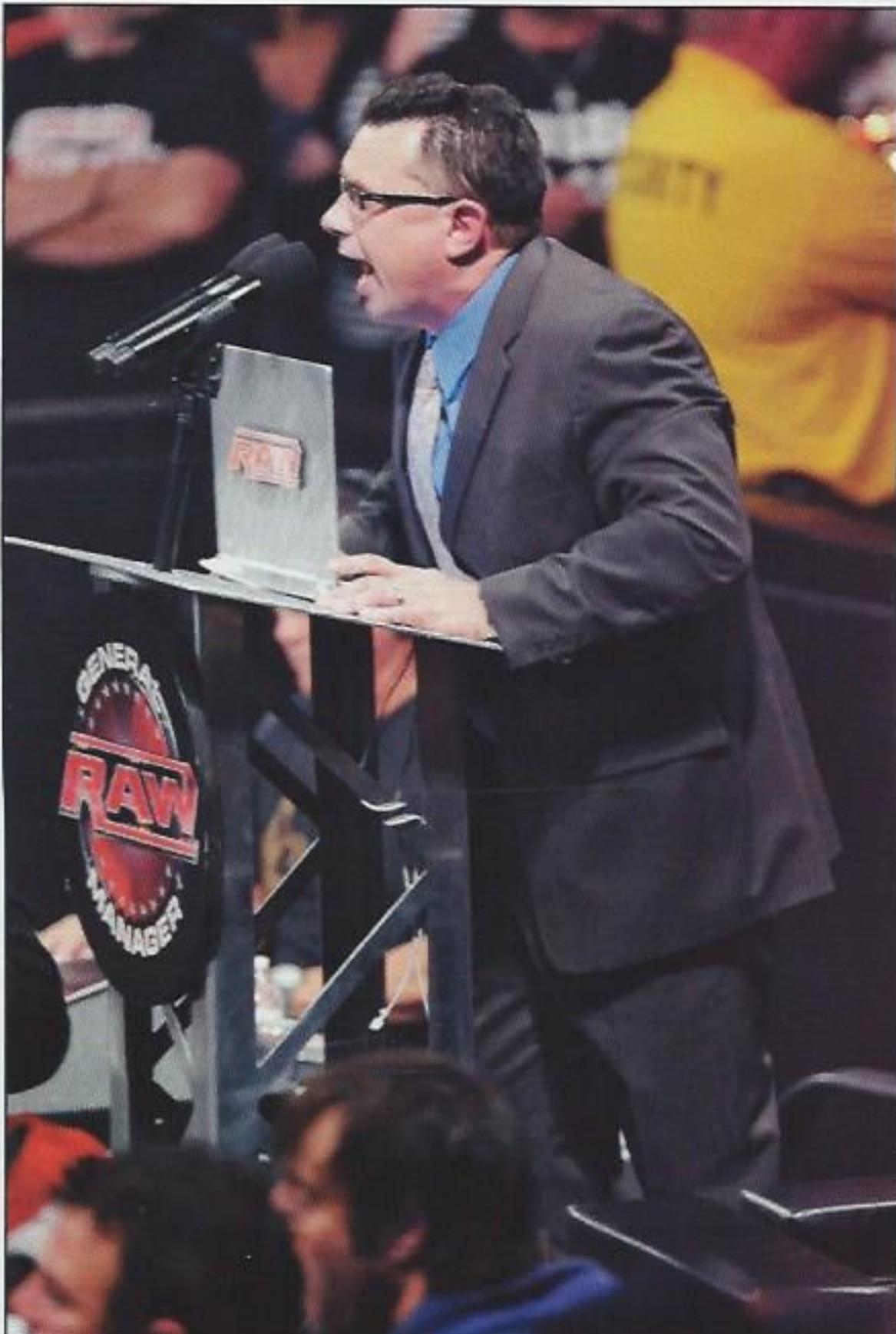


Photo by George Napolitano

As the man behind the laptop who was required to relay messages from Raw's anonymous GM, Michael Cole earned lots of jeers from the fans. But how much criticism he deserved in that role remains a mystery since WWE never revealed the GM's identity.

ROLL CALL OF CHAMPIONS

For period ended June 28, 2012

Championships highlighted in bold on the "Roll Call Of Champions" have changed hands since our previous issue. The information under the championship listing indicates the date that champion won the title, who the former champion was, and where the match took place.

AAA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: EL MESIAS
(March 18, 2012; from Jeff Jarrett; Zapopan, Mexico)

AAA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: ABYSS & CHESSMAN
(October 9, 2011; from Extreme Tiger & Jack Evans; Monterrey, Mexico)

ALL JAPAN UNIFIED TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MANABU SOYA & TAKAO OMORI
(June 17, 2012; from Joe Doering & Seiya Sanada; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KAI
(May 27, 2012; from Kenny Omega; Tokyo, Japan)

ALL JAPAN TRIPLE CROWN CHAMPION: JUN AKIYAMA
(October 23, 2011; from Suwama; Tokyo, Japan)

CMLL HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: EL TERRIBLE
(January 1, 2012; beat Rush for vacant title; Mexico City, Mexico)

CMLL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: DRAGON ROJO JR. & ULTIMO GUERRERO
(November 2, 2010; from Mr. Aguila & Hector Garza; Mexico City, Mexico)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: PAPADON
(March 5, 2011; from Mega; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION MID-ATLANTIC CHAMPION: MR. OOH LA LA
(June 2, 2012; from Mike Tartaglia; Newark, DE)

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: MATT SAIGON & DAMIAN DRAGON
(May 5, 2012; from Chris Rockwell & Sam Shields; Newark, DE)

FCW FLORIDA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: BO DALLAS
(June 16, 2012; from Rick Victor; Crystal River, FL)

FCW FLORIDA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: LEAKEE & MIKE DALTON
(June 15, 2012; from Corey Graves & Jake Carter; Palatka, FL)

FCW FLORIDA DIVAS CHAMPION: RAQUEL DIAZ
(December 15, 2011; from Audrey Marie; Tampa, FL)

IWGP HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: HIROSHI TANAHASHI
(June 16, 2012; from Kazuchika Okada; Osaka, Japan)

IWGP INTERNATIONAL TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: VACANT
(June 20, 2012; Takashi Iizuka & Toru Yano stripped of title)

IWGP JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: LOW-KI
(May 3, 2012; from Prince Devitt; Fukuoka, Japan)

NWA HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: COLT CABANA
(April 8, 2012; from Adam Pearce; Glendale, CA)

NWA JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: KEVIN DOUGLAS
(October 7, 2011; beat Chase Owens in tournament final for vacant title; Charlotte, NC)

NWA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: KORY CHAVIS & JON DAVIS
(May 15, 2011; from A.J. Steele & Murder-One; Warner Robins, GA)

NWA WOMEN'S CHAMPION: TASHA SIMONE
(December 25, 2011; from Tiffany Roxx; Lebanon, TN)

OVW HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: ROB TERRY
(May 12, 2012; from Johnny Spade; Louisville, KY)

OVW SOUTHERN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: VACANT
(June 20, 2012; Jessie Godderz & Rudy Switchblade stripped of title)

OVW TV CHAMPION: VACANT
(June 13, 2012; Jamin Olivencia stripped of title)

OVW WOMEN'S CHAMPION: EPIPHANY
(June 3, 2012; from Taeler Hendrix; Louisville, KY)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA CHAMPION: KEVIN STEEN
(March 17, 2012; from El Generico; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING GUERRILLA TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: PLAYER UNO & STUPEFIED
(May 25, 2012; beat Matt & Nick Jackson for vacant title; Reseda, CA)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN CHAMPION: TAKESHI MORISHIMA
(January 22, 2012; from Go Shiozaki; Osaka, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN JUNIOR HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION: YOSHINOBU KANEMARU
(May 9, 2012; beat Katsuhiko Nakajima; Tokyo, Japan)

PRO WRESTLING NOAH GLOBAL HONORED CROWN TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: JUN AKIYAMA & AKITOSHI SAITO
(January 22, 2012; from Giant Bernard & Karl Anderson; Osaka, Japan)

RING OF HONOR CHAMPION: KEVIN STEEN
(May 12, 2012; from Davey Richards; Toronto, ON)

RING OF HONOR TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: RHETT TITUS & KENNY KING
(June 24, 2012; from Charlie Haas & Shelton Benjamin; New York, NY)

RING OF HONOR TV CHAMPION: RODERICK STRONG
(March 31, 2011; from Jay Lethal; Fort Lauderdale, FL)

SHIMMER CHAMPION: SARAYA KNIGHT
(March 18, 2011; from Cheerleader Melissa; Berwyn, IL)

TNA TV CHAMPION: DEVON
(March 18, 2012; from Robbie E; Orlando, FL)

TNA KNOCKOUTS CHAMPION: BROOKE TESSMACHER
(June 10, 2012; from Gail Kim; Arlington, TX)

TNA KNOCKOUTS TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: ERIC YOUNG & ODB
(February 23, 2012; from Gail Kim & Madison Rayne; Orlando, FL)

TNA WORLD CHAMPION: BOBBY ROODE
(October 26, 2011; from James Storm; Macon, GA)

TNA WORLD TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: CHRISTOPHER DANIELS & KAZARIAN
(June 28, 2012; from Kurt Angle & AJ Styles; Arlington, TX)

TNA X DIVISION CHAMPION: AUSTIN ARIES
(September 11, 2011; from Brian Kendrick; Orlando, FL)

WWE INTERCONTINENTAL CHAMPION: CHRISTIAN
(May 20, 2012; from Cody Rhodes; Raleigh, NC)

WWE WORLD CHAMPION: SHEAMUS
(April 1, 2012; from Daniel Bryan; Miami, FL)

WWE TAG TEAM CHAMPIONS: KOFI KINGSTON & R-TRUTH
(April 30, 2012; from Primo & Epico; Dayton, OH)

WWE CHAMPION: CM PUNK
(November 20, 2011; from Alberto Del Rio; New York, NY)

WWE U.S. CHAMPION: SANTINO MARELLA
(March 5, 2012; from Jack Swagger; Boston, MA)

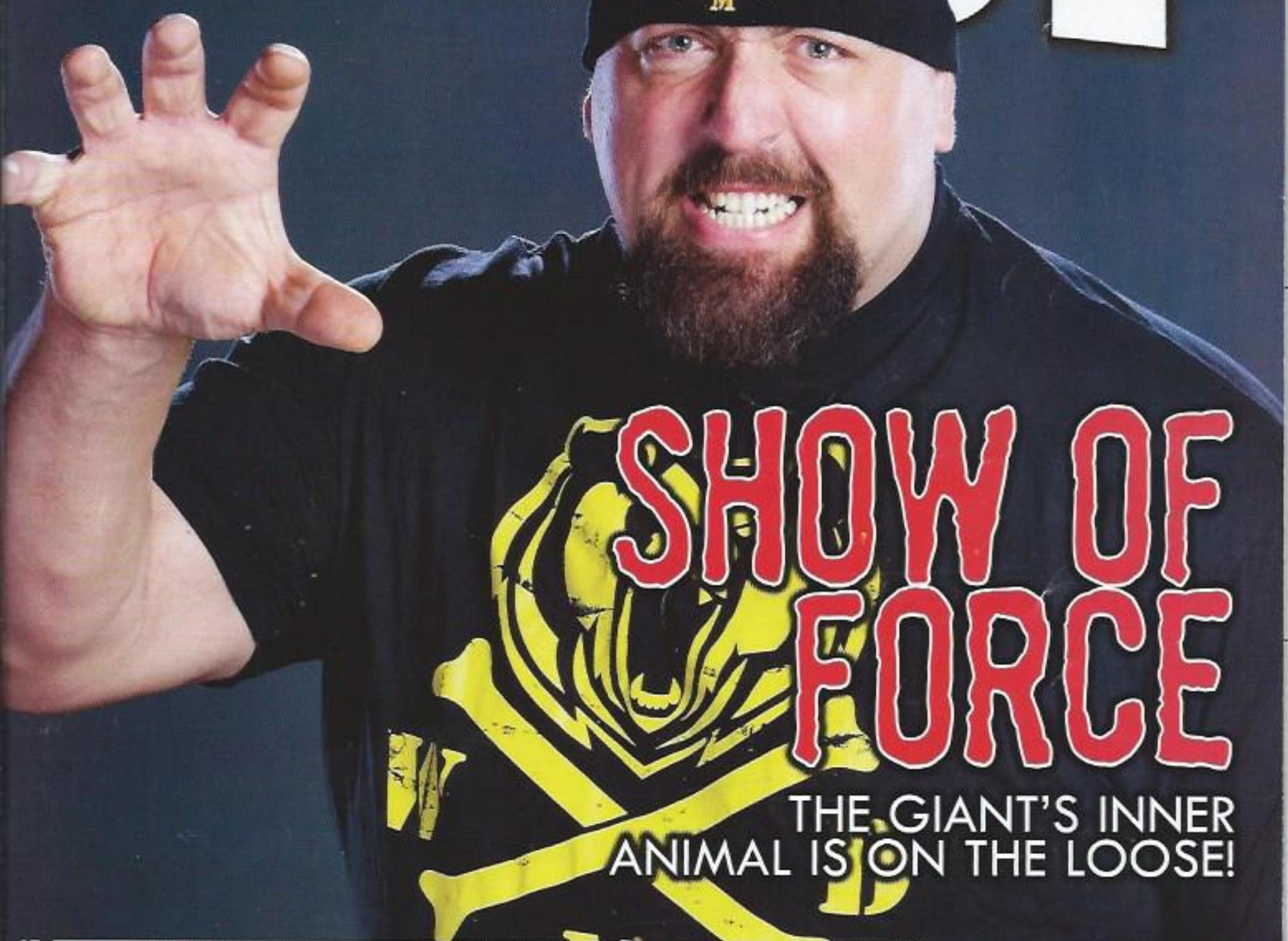
WWE DIVAS CHAMPION: LAYLA
(April 15, 2012; from Nikki Bella; Rosemont, IL)



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WHAT'S HAPPENING

BY HARRY BURKETT

RANDY ORTON IS preparing for his return from a 60-day suspension as of press time, and there's plenty of speculation regarding his future in WWE. Orton may receive a big push to boost ratings in the short-term, but his relationship with WWE management has never been worse.

Orton was suspended for 60 days beginning on May 30 because he flunked a drug test, reportedly testing positive for steroids and marijuana (*flip this issue to "Was Randy Orton's Suspension Good For WWE?" on page 28*). It is his second Wellness Program violation. No one heard from Orton for the first two weeks of the suspension, which, in terms of television and social media, is a notable length of time. Fortunately for Orton, WWE does not suspend its employees' use of Twitter during these forced sabbaticals. When a Twitter follower asked Orton if he was "smoking weed," Orton replied, "I can neither confirm nor deny."

He added that it "feels good to be refreshed and ready to return." The third-generation star noted that he had been in strength training four times per week with a personal trainer. It sounds as if Orton was almost glad to have the time off and has devoted his energies toward coming back stronger and more formidable than ever.

Expect Orton to receive a healthy push for the rest of the summer, particularly with *Raw* going to three hours and *SummerSlam* approaching. But then what? World champion **Sheamus'** overwhelming popularity on the Smackdown brand proves that WWE can survive without the "Apex Predator." Several years ago, WWE Chairman **Vince McMahon** reportedly had a serious discussion with Orton regarding his maturity issues that have included trashing hotel rooms and harassing female employees. While Orton is a natural in the ring and respected by most of his peers, there are serious doubts whether he can be trusted with a full-scale push. That's not a good place for Orton, with so many hungry up-and-comers in the lockerroom.

Chris Jericho has returned from a 30-day suspension stemming from a very different matter. Reminiscent of **John Bradshaw Layfield** goose-stepping during a 2004 tour of Germany, Jericho crumpled and kicked the Brazilian flag during a May 24 match against WWE champion **CM Punk** in Brazil. As with the JBL incident in Germany, such actions are illegal in the South American country. When local police threatened to arrest Jericho, he apologized to the crowd and continued with the match. The following day, WWE issued a statement, apolo-

gizing to the Brazilian people and their government, and suspended Jericho for 30 days. Conveniently for Jericho and WWE, he was already booked for a European tour with his band, Fozzy, during the same period. (Somewhere, **Fit Finlay** is wondering why he didn't get a 30-day vacation for a similar snafu last year.)

Jericho remains in good stead with WWE management because his actions seemed to be an honest mistake in judgment, while Orton's situation seems to be a lifestyle issue that, if repeated, will result in his banishment from the company for at least a year. Jericho was pushed into the main-event mix immediately upon his June 25 return to *Raw*. The only controversy seemed to be that the glare of the spotlight revealed a change in Jericho's facial

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After serving a 30-day suspension for defacing the Brazilian flag, Chris Jericho returned to *Raw* to confront John Cena. Perhaps the most noteworthy thing about this Monday night was the change in Jericho's physical appearance.

Randy Orton's WWE future may be in question after his return from a 60-day suspension for violating the company's Wellness Program a second time. If The Miz can recapture his 2010 form in the ring, he could make "The Viper" expendable.



Photo by George Napolitano

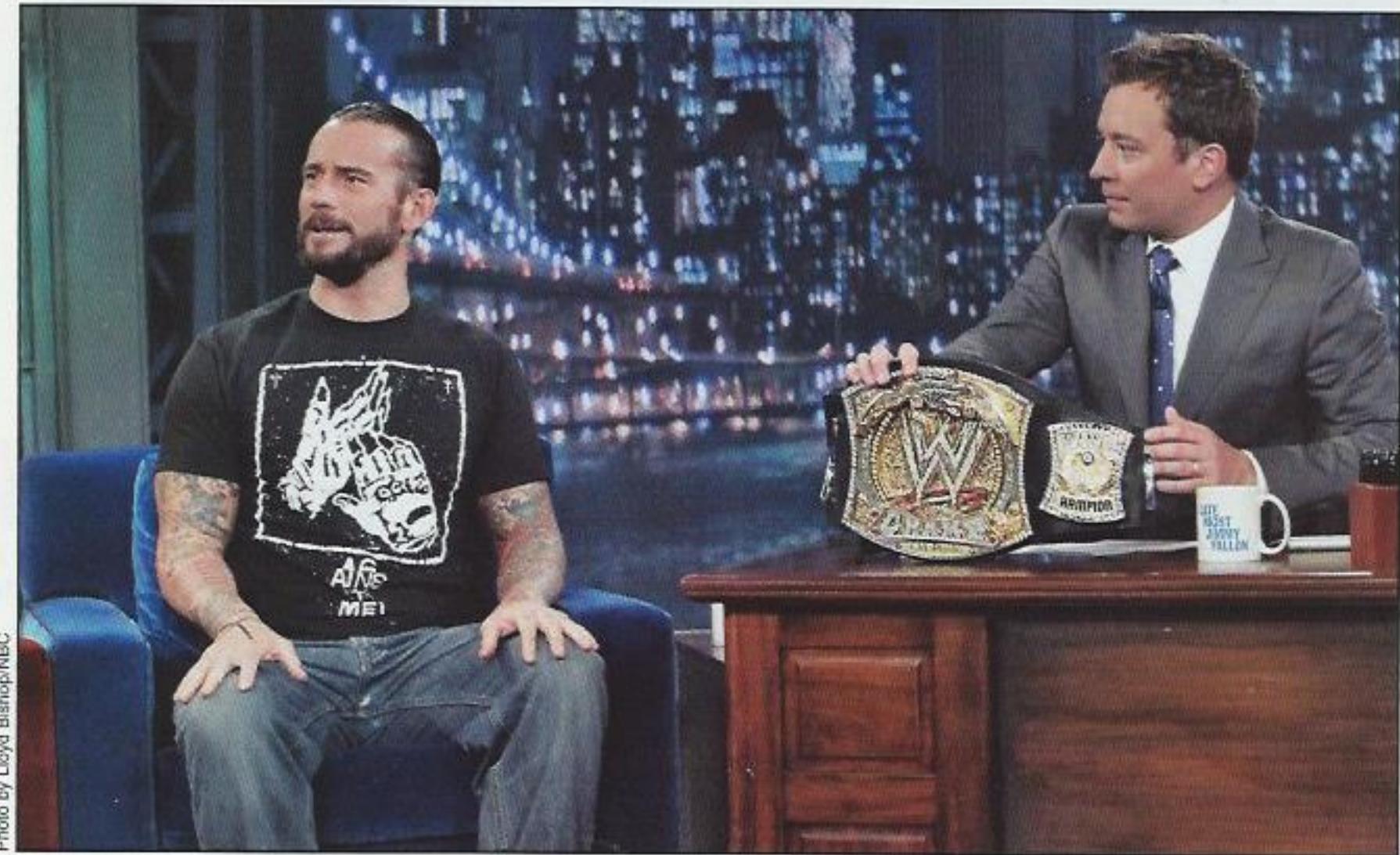


Photo by Lloyd Bishop/NBC

Proving his pipe bombs are not limited to *Raw* and *Smackdown*, CM took some good-natured shots at NFL quarterback Tim Tebow when he appeared on *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*.

appearance and his hair. Did he have cosmetic surgery? Was it Botox? Was he trying to resemble a burned-out rocker?

The former undisputed champ took the analysis with good humor, tweeting, "Ok, so last night on Raw apparently I looked like: 1. **Bon Jovi** 2. **Gordon Ramsay** 3. **Michael J. Fox** 4. **Dave Coulier** 5. **Kevin Bacon** 6. **Cher**."

Boy, this guy really hasn't left the '80s.

WWE champ CM Punk, who always seems to be taking heat for his comments, was about to do "snow angels" on the studio floor during his appearance on *Late Night With Jimmy Fallon*, when he quipped, "I know you are a **Tim Tebow** fan, so this is kind of like Tebowing, except unlike Tebow, I actually am a champion."

Fans may remember that he took a similar swipe at singer **Chris Brown** during the lead-up to WrestleMania. Punk certainly knows how to attach those verbal pipe bombs to the right targets to gain the most attention for himself.

The original master of the pipe bomb, **Scott Steiner**, may have to use his gift of oratory to defend himself in a court of law. For years, Steiner has publicly lambasted wrestling's biggest names—ranging from **Ric Flair** to **Triple-H**—on live television and in media interviews, and it seems "Big Poppa Pump" has taken on more than he can handle: **Hulk Hogan**. Steiner disparaged former employer TNA, Hulk Hogan, and **Eric Bischoff** in a series of angry and sometimes profane tweets.

TNA filed a verified complaint against Steiner on June 18 in Chancery Court in Davidson County, Tennessee. Lawyers claim that Steiner's comments violate the contract he signed with

TNA back in December 2010, forbidding him from making public statements—including tweets—concerning the company or its officers, wrestlers, or other individuals without prior approval, according to *The Nashville City Paper*.

A month earlier, Steiner acknowledged he was feeling the legal heat, tweeting, "Havent tweeted lately bcuz I got a letter from a lawyer representing Hogan n Bischoff basically saying ... They take my tweets seriously and if threats continue they will take to law enforcement ... really Hogan my tweets scare you, I've said worse in interviews on TV, LOL." And that didn't stop "Big Poppa Pump" from making crude comments about **Brooke Hogan** even after he received legal notice.

Scott Steiner and Twitter ... seems like social media hell to me.

One heartfelt knock against Ric Flair in his prime was that he made other stars look too good at his own expense. Well, it seems that Flair was doing a lot of selling in his latest domestic dispute, this time with the wife dishing it out. On the night of June 25, Flair allegedly sustained a punch to the face and other minor injuries at the hands of his fourth wife, **Jacqueline Beems**, at their condominium in Charlotte, North Carolina. The "Nature Boy" didn't do the stretcher job, though, as he refused hospital treatment.

The Flairs have a history of scrapes with the law. Beems was arrested and charged with DWI and reckless driving on March 31 of this year, and she was also arrested for assaulting Flair in another domestic dispute in 2010. And Flair has a long rap sheet dating back to the 1970s. In the 21st century alone, Flair received cuts and bruises in altercations involving his



Hulk Hogan and Scott Steiner may have tried to hammer out their differences in the ring, but that wasn't good enough for Steiner, who has attacked Hogan and TNA repeatedly on Twitter.

daughter and her boyfriend in 2008, and he was charged with grabbing a motorist by the neck in 2005. And that doesn't count his many legal woes in recent years, including his problems with Highspots and also TNA, which fired Flair for breach of contract this past May.

I have an idea for Ric and Jackie: How about *The Real Housewives Of North Carolina*?

Congratulations go out to **The All-Night Express**, who dethroned **Shelton Benjamin** and **Charlie Haas** for the Ring of Honor tag belts on June 24 at the Best in the World iPPV. **Rhett Titus** and **Kenny King** are being hailed in some parts as the greatest tag team in the world, considering the ROH's competitive tag team division right now. The All-Nights defeated **The Briscoe Brothers** at last year's Death by Dishonor and now they've defeated **Wrestling's Greatest Tag Team**. Can anyone stop them?

Also at Best in the World, **Roderick Strong** kept the TV strap in a three-way match also involving **Tommaso Ciampa** and former champ **Jay Lethal**, and heavyweight champion **Kevin Steen** turned back **Davey Richards**.

In case you were wondering, **Torrie Wilson** and Yankees third baseman **Alex Rodriguez** are still a happy couple. The duo has been spotted courtside at Lakers games and going on exotic beach vacations in Mexico. The pair has also teamed up with **Stacy Keibler** and **George Clooney** for some fun in the sun. And, in case you missed it, Torrie and A-Rod were listed number 87 in Zimbio's "100 Hottest Celebrity Couples" this year, a respectable ranking considering they've been dating for less than a year. But they do have some stiff competition, with **Jay-Z** and **Beyoncé Knowles**, **Brad Pitt** and **Angelina Jolie**, **David** and **Victoria Beckham**, and **Prince William** and **Princess Kate** topping the list. By the way, George and Stacy ranked an impressive 42.

Speaking of media buzz, what about **AJ**? A good way to track the popularity of celebrities is how well they're doing in

the collectibles market. According to collectibles expert **Michael Moore** at pwtorch.com, AJ's card from the 2011 Topps WWE Classic package has increased in value from the \$25-\$30 range to double that number. In fact, eBay, Amazon, and several trading card sites no longer have any available. Moore predicts that AJ's new autograph and lip-print cards will be the most valuable in the 2012 Topps set, due for release in September.

And here's a final round of tidbits: WWE will launch WWE Main Event on the Ion Television Network on Wednesday, October 3. The new show will fill the void left by *WWE Superstars*, which ended its run on WGN America last year ... **Evan Bourne**, who is recovering from an injury following his 60-day Wellness Policy suspension, is booked for Florida Championship Wrestling ... **Luke Gallows'** feud with **Jake "The Machine" Davis** has spread from Georgia to West Virginia, where Davis is the Elite Pro heavyweight champion ... **Wes Brisco** and his father, **Jerry Brisco**, have been making frequent appearances on

Dory Funk Jr.'s Bang! TV. **Mick Foley** injected a good share of comedy into his recent *Raw* appearance ... ECWA champion **Papadon** continues his rampage, with the "Greek God" downing **Adam Cole** in Newark, Delaware, in early-June ... **Jerry Lawler** beat former *Tough Enough* contestant **Luke Robinson** at another stellar Northeast Wrestling event in Newburgh, New York ... Dragon Gate USA has stripped **Masato Yoshino** and **Ricochet** of the promotion's tag team belts due to Yoshino's unavailability for DGUSA shows for the rest of the year ... Traditional Championship Wrestling has assembled a first-rate broadcast team for its weekly program: former WCW announcer **Chris Cruise**, former AWA announcer **Ken Resnick**, and **Brian Thompson**. The Arkansas-based promotion's top star is **Tim Storm**, who won the *Wringenmeisterschaft* Invitational Tournament down in Texas a couple of years ago.

It's been great sitting in for "What's Happening" this issue. And remember: Save a ringside seat for me. □



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Former WWE Diva Torrie Wilson and New York Yankee Alex Rodriguez have demonstrated some staying power as a celebrity couple. Aside from taking in L.A. Lakers games at courtside, Wilson and A-Rod also attended WrestleMania 28, where they were greeted by John Cena.

ON ASSIGNMENT

ON NOVEMBER 25, 1985, Wendi Richter walked out of the World Wrestling Federation. I mean that literally. She walked out of Madison Square Garden, still wearing her wrestling gear, caught a cab to the airport, and went home.

The Montreal Screwjob gets all the publicity, but 12 years before Vince screwed Bret, Vince did the same thing to Wendi, who was then one of the company's most popular—and marketable—stars. In fact, *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* ran a cover story at the time that asked "Is Wendi Richter More Popular Than Hulk Hogan?" A case could be made that she was.

But Wendi committed the cardinal sin of being a businesswoman in a man's world. She wanted to know where the royalty money was going for all those poster sales, action figures, and lunch

boxes that featured her name and image. She wanted to know why she wasn't being paid as much as Hogan and the top male wrestlers on the roster. She wanted to negotiate a contract, not just sign whatever piece of paper was handed to her, as if she was lucky to be offered a contract in the first place.

On that particular night, Wendi defended her WWF Women's championship against a mysterious opponent known as The Spider Lady, who turned out to be The Fabulous Moolah under a mask. With the help of a fast three-count from the referee, during which Richter successfully escaped a small-package attempt, Moolah pinned Richter and took the title belt. Richter was incensed and she—like Bret a dozen years later—walked out of the company.

Just like "The Hitman," Richter was deeply hurt by the incident. She felt mis-

treated by the WWF and the wrestling industry in general. After a few more years competing in the AWA and on the independent circuit, she retired from wrestling and eventually settled into a lucrative career as a physical therapist.

It took almost a quarter of a century for Wendi to make peace with WWE. She turned down an invitation to compete in the Miss WrestleMania battle royal at WrestleMania 25 (which turned out to be a sham won by "Santino" Marella). In 2010, she accepted an invitation to be inducted into the WWE Hall of Fame. It was a bittersweet honor, being lauded by the company that had betrayed her trust so many years earlier.

The "honor" was a long, long time in coming, but Wendi had finally received the accolades she was due. She was a WWE Hall-of-Famer, a far cry from the Dallas



Wendi Richter (along with Cyndi Lauper and Roddy Piper) recently appeared on *Raw* to promote the show's 1,000th episode. Liz Hunter feels Richter wasn't given the same star treatment her male counterparts received upon their return, which, Hunter says is further evidence of WWE's misogyny.

farm girl who got too big for her britches. Wendi Richter was finally getting the respect she deserved. After all, she was as much a part of the success of the first WrestleMania as Hogan, Roddy Piper, and Mr. T; perhaps more so, given that her pairing with Cyndi Lauper helped the WWF get national exposure on MTV, which was vital to the event's success. Or so I thought.

On the June 18 episode of *Raw*, Richter and Lauper appeared as guests to help promote *Raw*'s upcoming 1,000th episode (never mind the fact that neither Richter nor Lauper had ever appeared on the *Raw* program). It should have been a joyful occasion, as Cyndi and Wendi danced out to the ring to the strains of "Girls Just Want to Have Fun."

Instead of being treated like living legends (as Vader and Psycho Sid were when they made similar appearances), announcer Michael Cole openly mocked them. Barely two minutes into the segment, Heath Slater came to the ring calling

the segment "a trainwreck." That brought out old standby Roddy Piper, who presented Lauper with a gold record, which was then shattered over Slater's head.

In theory, the segment was designed to be a feel-good moment. Piper and Lauper finally made peace, and Lauper stood up for herself against an annoying bully. But the way it all came off bothered me. Richter wasn't presented as a Hall-of-Famer. She never got a chance to bask in the cheers of the fans. In fact, her return was barely promoted at all. Few fans realized that this was the first time Wendi had set foot inside a WWE ring in nearly 30 years. Wendi was presented as an afterthought; a supporting player in a play starring Lauper, Piper, and Slater. That's no way for a Hall-of-Famer to be treated, especially a Hall-of-Famer who was so poorly treated in the past.

Maybe I'm prejudiced on this issue. Maybe I'm Don Quixote, thinking every windmill I see is a dragon. But I found this

segment to be further evidence of a deep-seated misogyny within WWE. I find it hard to believe that a male wrestler appearing on *Raw* under similar circumstances would have been treated so shabbily.

It seems to me that once a woman has passed the age of 35, she becomes fair game to be ridiculed. Sexy Divas are treated as stars, even the would-be models that have never accomplished a darned thing in the wrestling business, while middle-aged women are mocked. For more evidence, just look at the weekly treatment of Vickie Guerrero, or the incredibly crass comments that have been made about Lilian Garcia. It's nice to see that Wendi is happy, and that life outside of wrestling has treated her well. I just wish that WWE would be more genuine with its appreciation of the part she played in the company's history. Wendi Richter paved the way for the Divas division; she deserves more respect than WWE has bothered to show. □

Wonder what Bret Hart and Richter are chatting about at the WrestleReunion 2 convention in 2005? We can only guess that the names Shawn Michaels, Fabulous Moolah, and Vince McMahon came up. Both would later reconcile with WWE, but some bitterness has to remain over the manner in which they lost their titles.



Photo by George Napolitano

ON THE FARM

BY LOUIE DEE

THIS TIME, FCW TV is gone for real. The long-rumored, oft-speculated shakeup of WWE developmental is seemingly underway, and *FCW TV* appears to be the first major casualty. The promotion held its final TV taping—July 8, Episode #197.

With WWE Hall of Famers Jim Ross and Dusty Rhodes behind the mike, the final match to air on Florida's Bright House Sports Network saw Dean Ambrose and William Regal battle to a no-contest. The match was stopped due to excessive blood loss by Regal, but that wasn't enough for Ambrose. He refused to let anyone into the ring to assist Regal after the stoppage, utilizing many of his adversary's signature moves, including the Knee Trembler and the Regal Stretch.

It was a fittingly chaotic end for *FCW TV*, a show that has been in limbo since rumors of its demise became strong enough to warrant a comment from WWE Executive Vice President of Talent Triple-H.

In addition to the Regal-Ambrose match, the final few episodes of *FCW TV* saw multiple defenses of the FCW Florida heavyweight title, Richie Steamboat stop Antonio Cesaro in sudden-death overtime to retain the FCW 15 title, and tag team champions Corey Graves and Jake Carter retain their gold as well.

Although the book on *FCW TV* is officially closed, the future stars of Florida already have a new outlet in place to showcase their skills. WWE decided to finish out the season of *WWE NXT* with FCW talent in the mix, and reached an agreement with Full Sail University in Orlando to use the school's film facilities as the home base for a revamped version of the show.

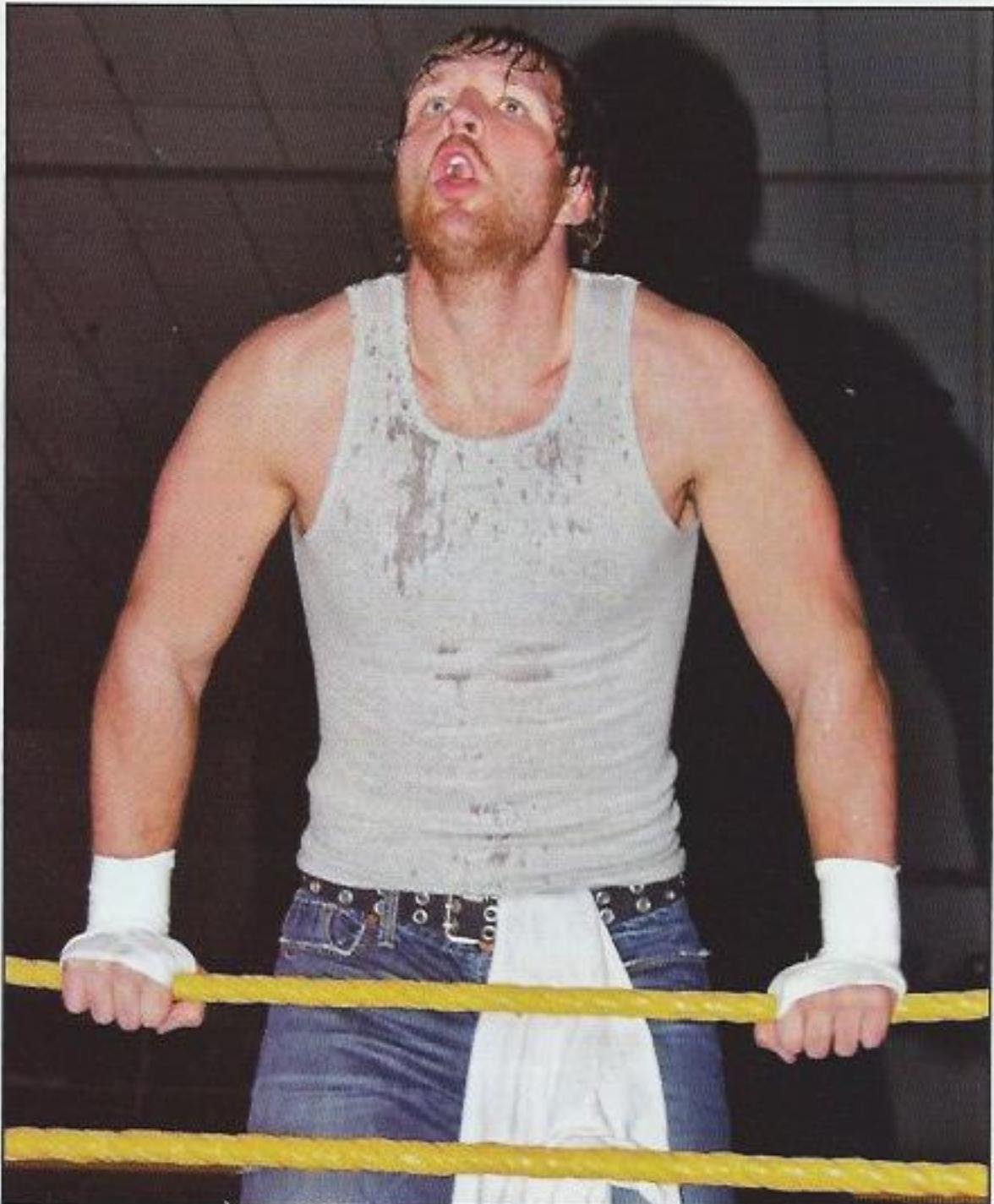
WWE taped the first four episodes of the new *NXT* on May 17, with the talent roster featuring a mix of FCW talent and mid-level WWE wrestlers (many of whom are FCW alumni) and a rotating

cast of announcers that included Ross, Regal, and regular FCW announcers Chris Russo and Byron Saxton on commentary. Dusty Rhodes served as the "interim *NXT GM*," and the six-man finale saw Michael McGillicutty, Hunico, and Camacho defeating Tyson Kidd, Seth Rollins, and Bo Dallas (Rotundo) to cap off a taping that several WWE officials considered a rousing success.

A second taping took place on June 14, but as of press time, the debut of the new *NXT* had been pushed back from

June 20 on wwe.com (following the final episode of the previous season) to an undetermined time and place. Hopefully, WWE will sort out the schedule soon, but in the meantime, FCW stars will continue to tour the Sunshine State on FCW's Summer Slamarama Tour.

The Real Big Ending. FCW's top two singles titles were a focus of the final *FCW TV* episodes, but while the FCW 15 title remains with Richie Steamboat, the Florida heavyweight championship changed hands twice in the span



Dean Ambrose's brutal assault on veteran William Regal will leave a lasting memory of the *FCW TV* show, which has been discontinued by order of WWE Executive VP Triple-H.

Photo by Duane Long

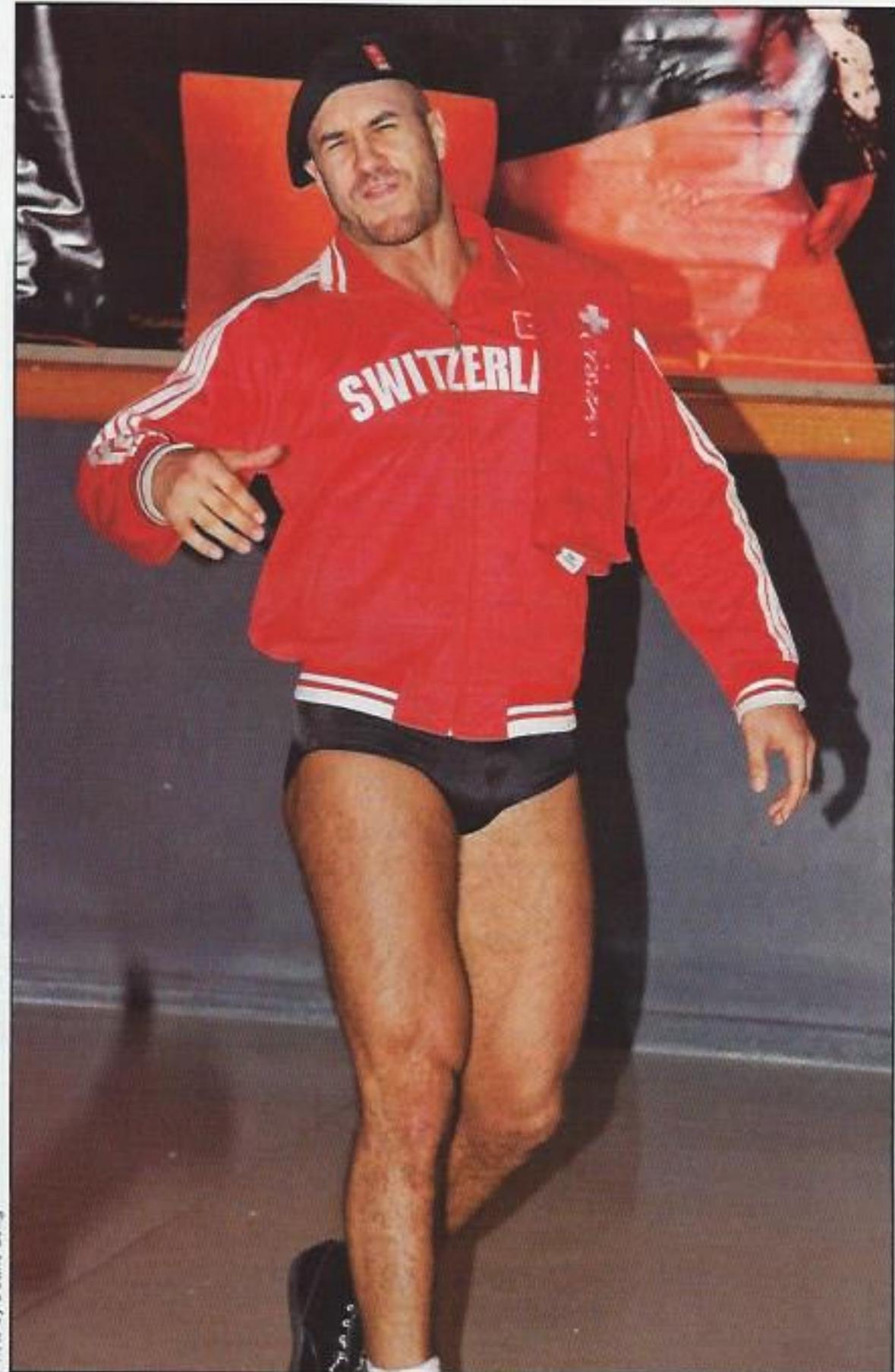


Photo by Duane Long

Antonio Cesaro wouldn't have such a smug look on his face after losing his prolonged feud with Richie Steamboat. Cesaro, however, is becoming a key figure on the Smackdown brand.

of about 15 minutes at a non-televised event on June 16. On that balmy night in Crystal River, Florida, Rick Victor ended Seth Rollins' near-four-month reign as champion, but his celebration didn't last long; in the very next match, he was challenged (and defeated) by Bo Dallas, making the newly renamed Rotundo brother a three-time FCW champ—and giving Victor the shortest title reign ever.

As far as the FCW 15 title, it seems that Steamboat has prevailed in his long-

running feud with Cesaro. The sudden-death victory on July 1 was his third consecutive defense against the former Claudio Castagnoli.

Several talents are lining up to challenge Steamboat, including Bray Wyatt (the former Husky Harris), who has looked impressive since changing his moniker and aligning with seven-footer Eli Cottonwood. Ohno and Erick Rowan scored some big wins during the spring, and Big E Langston, who was unsuc-

cessful in a bid to unseat Rollins in May, could be in the mix as well.

Meanwhile, back in Ohio ... Ohio Valley Wrestling's Saturday Night Special show on June 2 was a card The Family will never forget, as they lost three of the four OVW titles they possessed.

In just a few hours time, Epiphany defeated Taeler Hendrix to become OVW Women's champion, Jessie Godderz and Rudy Switchblade dropped the Southern tag team championship to Shiloh Jonze and Raul Lamotta, and Jamin Olivencia, who masqueraded for weeks as "Chito Martinez" to circumvent a ban on title shots, defeated Mohamed Ali Vaez to regain the TV title.

The Family quickly got some of that gold back, however, as Godderz and Switchblade would win the tag title again on the June 9 edition of *OVW TV*—but Vaez wasn't as lucky, as his rematch against Olivencia ended with the TV title being declared vacant by OVW Board Member Ken Wayne.

Referee Chris Sharpe, who has exhibited a notable case of selective judgment when it comes to The Family's matches, physically got involved in that contest, noticeably reversing an Olivencia pinfall attempt on Vaez and making a fast count to give Mohamed the title back.

Thankfully, that result didn't stand. Wayne charged the ring, and after declaring the title vacant, he put Sharpe under an "official review" and told The Family's leader, OVW Talent Arbitrator Josette Bynum, that she would have to explain her recent behavior to Wayne's former partner: OVW owner Dan Davis.

The following week, Wayne announced a tournament to fill the vacant TV title and announced a best-of-seven series between two teams chosen by Davis and Bynum, with the winner gaining control of OVW.

Could this finally be the end of The Family's reign of terror? □

THUMBS UP

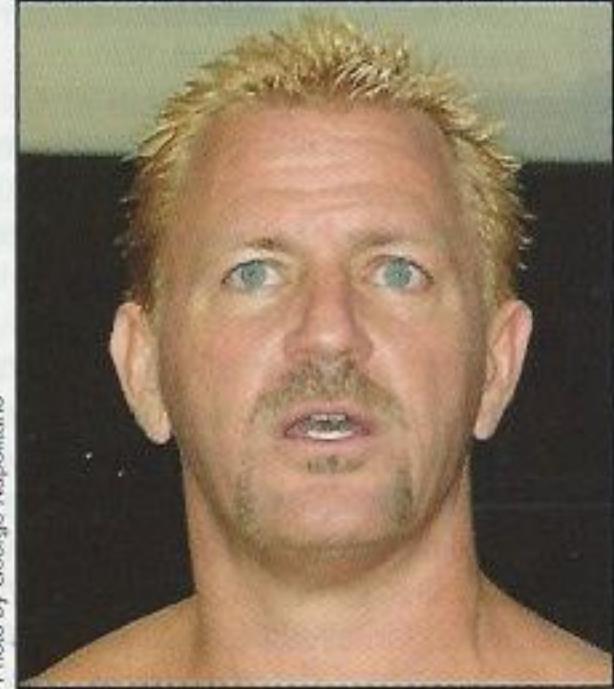


Photo by George Napolitano

Thumbs Up to Jeff Jarrett. Jarrett has caused a lot of headaches with his swinging guitars, so it was gratifying to see him put one to good use when he donated a signed acoustic to a Wrestlers Rescue auction to benefit former wrestler Kamala, who recently lost both legs to amputation in his ongoing fight against diabetes. Jeff may be cold and crass in the ring, but every now and then he makes it known that he does indeed have a heart. At the same time, we must give a bonus "Thumbs Up" to this issue's "Q&A" subject, Dawn Marie, who gives tirelessly of herself in heading up the Wrestlers Rescue organization.

Thumbs Up to Michael Elgin. We must give the man props for facing—and defeating—Fit Finlay at Best in the World 2012 without any help from The House of Truth. Truth Martini couldn't contain his excitement about getting involved in the match, but when it came

time for the opening bell to sound, Elgin, insisting that he wanted to beat Finlay on his own, demanded that Martini and stablemate Rod Strong stay away from ringside. Elgin recognized that an untainted victory over a legend like Finlay is a precious commodity. At this point, he doesn't seem long for The House of Truth.

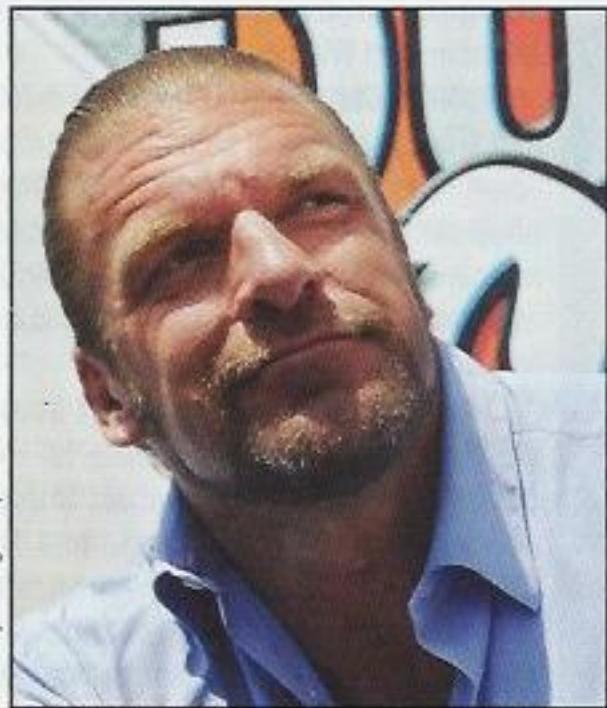


Photo by George Napolitano

Thumbs Up to Triple-H. Seeing HHH slug Paul Heyman on *Raw* was a real treat. Heyman was 100 percent transparent in stating that he could bully WWE and Triple-H with legal and physical threats into giving Brock Lesnar whatever he wants, but Triple-H proved that no matter what happens in the courtroom or at SummerSlam, he will hold Heyman accountable for his big mouth. It's good to see that Triple-H hasn't gone completely white collar.

Thumbs Up to Brodus Clay. Challenging The Big Show to a match in his *Raw* return took some guts. After being sidelined by Show's WMD KO punch, nobody would have blamed The Funkasaurus for tucking tail and avoiding the big man. Instead, Clay showed there's more to him than just a few

dance steps when he issued his challenge. More importantly, Clay nearly upended Show, proving he's capable of competing against A-class wrestlers in serious matches. Clay might have lost the bout, but he answered several questions about makeup.

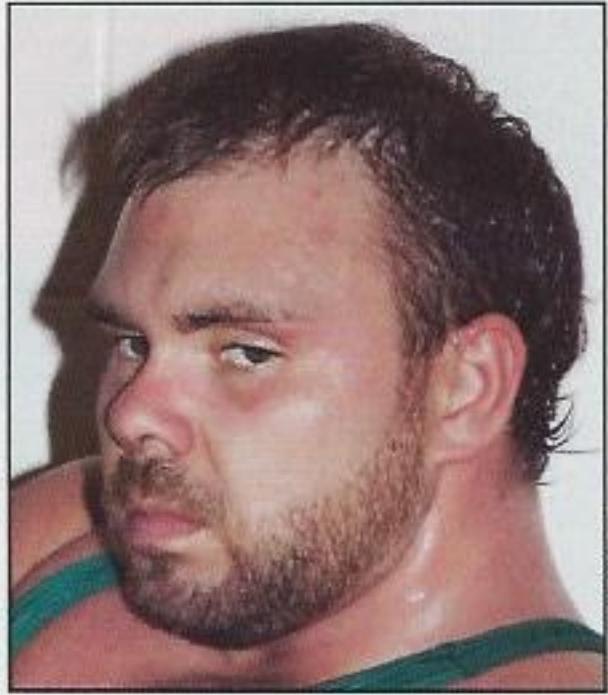
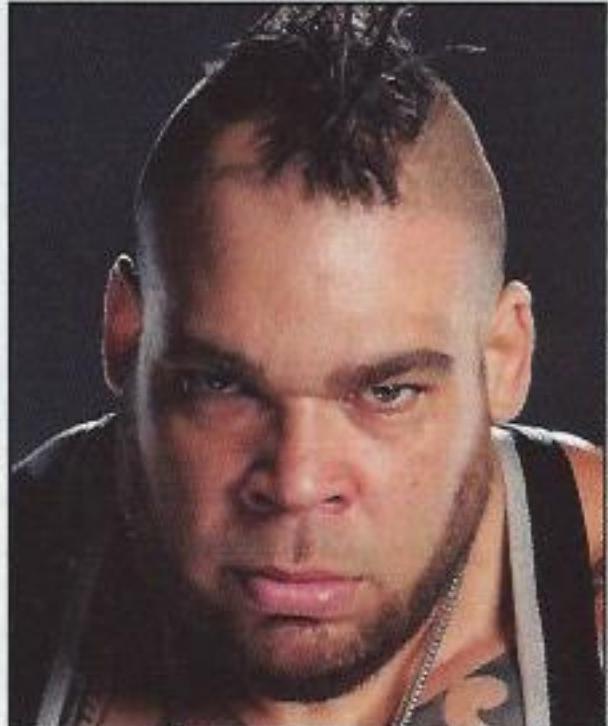


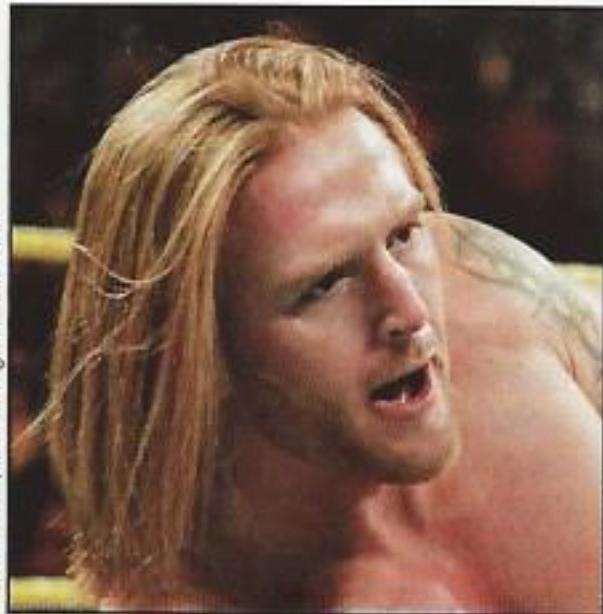
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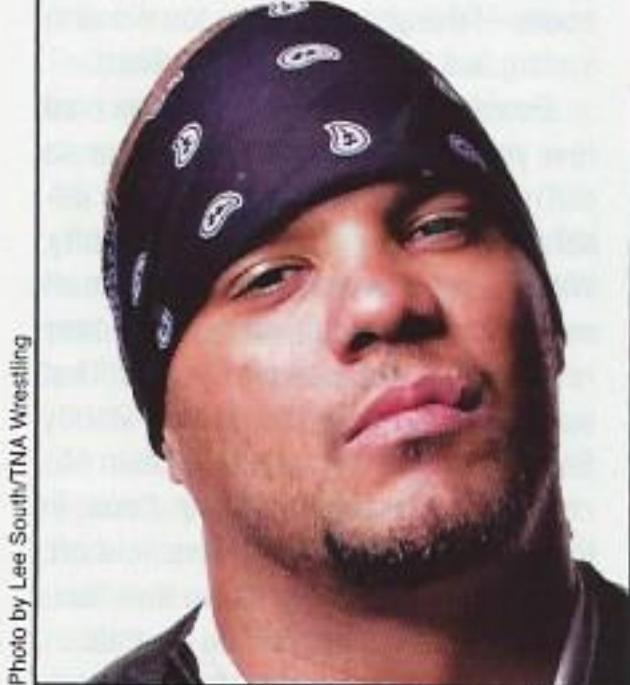
THUMBS DOWN

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Thumbs Down to Heath Slater. The way he disrespected the WWE legends returning to *Raw* prior to its 1,000th episode in July was deplorable. Slater deliberately attempted to spoil feel-good moments for Vader, Psycho Sid, and Wendi Richter, but, fortunately, these legends were able to turn the tables on Slater and embarrass him each time. Sure, watching Slater eat humble pie may be satisfying for longtime WWE fans that enjoy seeing the stars of yesteryear honored, but we bet the fans would enjoy their return even more if Slater just stopped his nonsense.

Thumbs Down to Gail Kim. The recent temper tantrum she threw on *Impact* was just plain embarrassing. When new Knockouts authority figure Brooke Hogan generously offered to include her in a four-way Knockouts number-one contender's match, Gail reacted as if Brooke had insulted her, and petulantly argued that as the longest-reigning Knockouts champion in company history, she should be appointed the number-one contender. And this coming from the woman who was named top contender to the Knockouts title in November without having wrestled a single match since returning to TNA. Sorry, Gail. You're no longer champ and Karen Angle is no longer around to pamper you.



Thumbs Down to Homicide. Spitting into Eddie Edwards' hand when he offered to shake at the start of their Best in the World 2012 match was immature at best. We understand that Homicide carries a thug's reputation into the ring, and spitting at an opponent is a great way for him to build even more street cred, but no wrestler, especially Edwards, deserves that degree of disrespect. As Eddie has shown time and again over the years, being talented and classy in the ring needn't be mutually exclusive.

Thumbs Down to Beth Phoenix. "The Glamazon" has been entirely too full of herself lately, and with no real reason. Even after losing the Divas title to Layla, she has wasted no opportunity to talk herself up on

Raw and *Smackdown* and in other media outlets or on social media. She has referred to herself as the greatest WWE Diva of all-time, yet doesn't back it up with consistent wins. Hey, Beth, you just focus on winning more matches, we'll decide where you fit in the history of women's wrestling.



WORKIN' STIFF

BY AL CASTLE

YOU MAY USE another term to refer to them, but throughout time, WWE has always kept a handful of "enhancement talents" on its roster—anywhere between six and 10 scrappy but limited wrestlers who are generally found low on the cards, and often on their backs.

In the 1980s, they included the likes of Jim Powers and "The Brooklyn Brawler" Steve Lombardi. In the 1990s you had

Salvatore Sincere and TL Hopper. And in the 2000s, Funaki and Jamie Noble were among the opening-match martyrs. Their matches were rarely much more than filler, but they served a purpose.

But that was then. While recently reviewing a list of all the wrestlers on WWE's main brands, it struck me how radically things have changed. Whereas the lower-card mainstays used to make up just a tiny percentage of an otherwise

star-studded lockerroom, today they account for almost two-thirds of the roster.

From JTG to Yoshi Tatsu to Johnny Curtis to Michael McGillicutty to Hunico to Jinder Mahal to Mason Ryan to Trent Baretta to Alex Riley to Drew McIntyre, and on and on, WWE is flooded with wrestlers confined largely to throw-away shows like *Superstars* and *NXT*. They can go months without making an appearance on *Raw* or *Smackdown*, and so, while talented, are not perceived as stars by many fans.

WWE decision-makers have complete control over that perception, and for various reasons believe all of those wrestlers are not ready for prime time. In some cases, they may be right. But given the lack of depth in WWE's main brands—and the company's decision to expand its flagship show, *Raw*, to three hours—I'd argue that being too discriminating is a luxury WWE can't afford.

Besides that, it's only over the past few years that WWE has become so self-destructively picky about who deserves the limelight. Throughout history, WWE higher-ups have rolled the dice on wrestlers with big flaws because they realized they also had big upsides. That was the case with the erratic Randy Savage, the temperamental Shawn Michaels, or the awkward John Cena. In those cases, WWE's gambles paid off, and the prospects rose above their limitations to become bona fide legends.

But to learn how to perform as stars, they had to be given opportunities to become stars. These days, those kind of opportunities are, to say the least, scarce.

Dues-paying has always been a part of pro wrestling, but never has the proverbial glass ceiling in WWE been so low and so thick. It took three other wrestlers being injured or suspended for WWE to insert Dolph Ziggler into a



Photo by George Napolitano

Opportunities like the one Dolph Ziggler received at No Way Out against World champion Sheamus, have been few and far between. At 32, it's time, Al Castle says, for the talented Ziggler to be given a chance to become a major star.

world title match with Sheamus at No Way Out. And Ziggler, who is 32 and has been part of WWE's main roster for seven years, is probably as close as any WWE mid-card wrestler to breaking through to the main-event scene.

Indeed, it's hard to find anyone in WWE's top tier of wrestlers who is under 30 and has less than a decade of wrestling experience. In comparison, Cena was 27 and had just four years experience when he won his first world title. Randy Orton was 24 with four years experience. I'd say both have done okay for themselves.

None of this is to say that the likes of Ted DiBiase Jr. or Curt Hawkins have the same potential that Orton or Cena did. But beggars can't be choosers, and WWE in 2012 is in desperate, desperate need of stars. Perennial main-event acts from the past decade like Triple-H, The Undertaker, and Chris Jericho are through working as full-time wrestlers. Kane and The Big Show are both over 40, and have to be thinking about life after wrestling. Orton, Cena, and CM Punk may still have plenty of years ahead in the sport, but how many times are they going to wrestle each other?

WWE's executives, including Executive Vice President of Talent Triple-H, regularly pay lip service to the importance of investing in new talent, and even overhauled their developmental system recently. But building for the future is about more than training new wrestlers. Unless you pull the trigger on elevating wrestlers already on the roster, all you're doing is adding to the backlog of talent that won't be featured on television.

I'm not proposing skyrocketing wrestlers into main-event spots for which they are woefully unprepared or undeserving. I'm proposing a system of true upward mobility—the same opportunities that

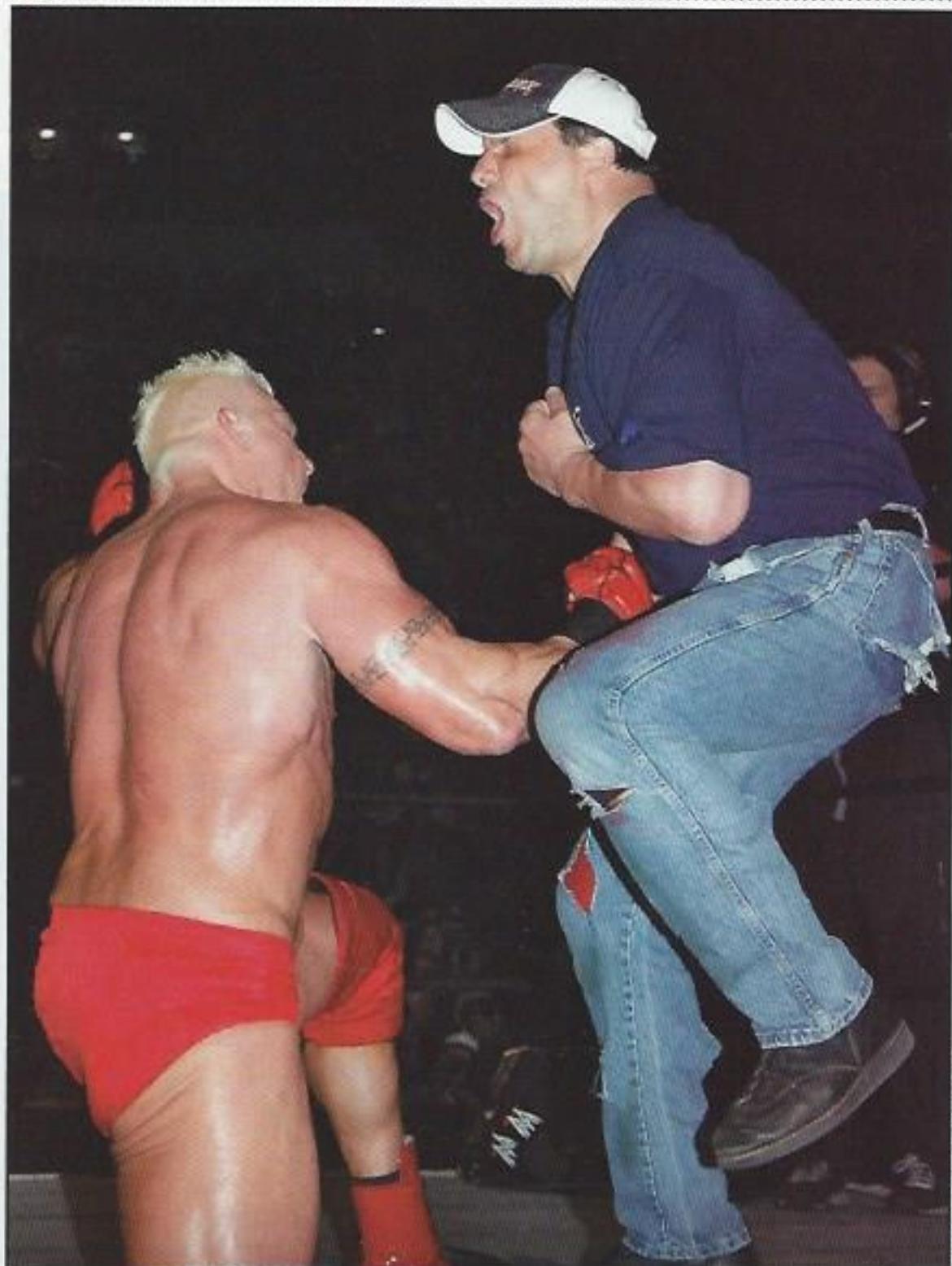


Photo by George Napolitano

Brooklyn Brawler was on the receiving end (here, against Heidenreich) for the majority of his career. Steve Lombardi served his role well, but, Castle notes, there are men on the WWE roster today who, based on their talent level, need to be bumped up a notch.

everyone in any line of work hopes for.

Moving Dolph Ziggler into the spot previously held by Chris Jericho opens up Ziggler's spot for someone like DiBiase. And Riley can move into DiBiase's spot, and so on. Everyone climbs up a rung.

WWE might claim that they have just such a system in place, but, with few exceptions, the evidence indicates otherwise. Tatsu, McGillicutty, Baretta, and others are in no better positions today than they were when they joined WWE three years ago. Arguably, they're in worse positions.

It's perfectly acceptable to have a handful of wrestlers on your payroll whose job it is to compete in the opening match of a live event, and help make bigger stars look good, but those spots are better suited for aging veterans on the downsides of their careers, like William Regal or Goldust.

If WWE doesn't think a young wrestler has what it takes to be featured on television after working for the company for years, then maybe it's time to cut bait. The last thing anybody needs is a roster full of Brooklyn Brawlers. □

Q & A

DAWN MARIE

"Returning to the real world isn't easy"

I'M A STAR, I'm a star!" That was one of Dawn Marie's refrains during her 1990s run in Extreme Championship Wrestling. While Dawn Marie was being intentionally campy during those moments, it was her passionate determination to become a star that helped her endure the lean times in her early career—with meager payoffs at high school gyms being the norm—and occasionally make her agree to the unthinkable, such as being stripped down to her underwear during her ECW Arena debut.

And there were the catfights—oh, my! Dawn Marie, Francine, Beulah McGillicutty, Kimona Wanalaya, and others were risqué at times. Yet, without even realizing it, Dawn Marie and her peers were redefining the role of women in pro wrestling. They transcended their supporting roles as valets and managers to become attractions in their own right, with catfights becoming nearly as popular as the main events in ECW.

Indeed, one can draw a straight line from ECW's vixens to the WWE Divas of today. Dawn Marie's career followed that line, from her days scratching and clawing with Francine and managing The Impact Players, to joining the Smackdown roster in 2002.

WWE Creative used Dawn Marie's queen-of-mean persona to inject an interesting soap-opera element into Smackdown storylines. After a brief flirtation with fellow beauty Torrie Wilson, for example, Dawn Marie pursued Torrie's real-life father, Al Wilson. Her wedding to Al was one of the weirdest moments in WWE history. The angle took a bizarre turn when Dawn Marie exhausted Wilson during their honeymoon, causing him to suffer a (fortunately, not real-life) fatal heart attack. That escalated her feud with Torrie, with Dawn Marie as the wicked stepmother, complete with black lingerie.

In 2005, Dawn Marie reunited with former charge Lance Storm for One Night Stand, a reunion of ECW stars on WWE pay-per-view. Soon after, WWE released Dawn Marie, who was pregnant at the time. The ensuing legal dispute was settled out of court.

Dawn Marie has kept busy since then, co-founding MUDA Multimedia Entertainment with business partner Michele Mupo and creating Wrestlers Rescue, a non-profit organization dedicated to raising funds for retired wrestlers who need medical procedures and helping wrestlers transition to new careers outside the business. She is currently spearheading a fundraising drive for Kamala, whose legs were amputated because of diabetes. (Anyone wishing to contribute to the fundraising effort, or to book a performer through Wrestlers Rescue, is

invited to visit wrestlersrescue.org.)

"Although Dawn Marie has always been very entertaining, I never pinpointed the reasons for her success until we did this interview," stated Senior Writer Harry Burkett, who conducted a 90-minute "Q&A" with the former ECW and WWE Diva. "She's a perfectionist and a tremendous self-starter, traits that have served her well both as a performer and an entrepreneur. She has a good heart, too, and that has earned her countless friends throughout the industry."

Q: In one of our magazines several years ago, I described your persona as the "all-American sweetheart gone wrong." How did the girl next door become such a brat?

A: What I did with my character was look around and watch the people who would do things that annoyed me. I knew that if it annoyed me, then it would annoy everybody else. I would study those people and then do those things in front of the camera. So I can see why you would say that I was the "all-American sweetheart gone wrong."

Q: Did you ever have a solid run as a fan favorite at any point?

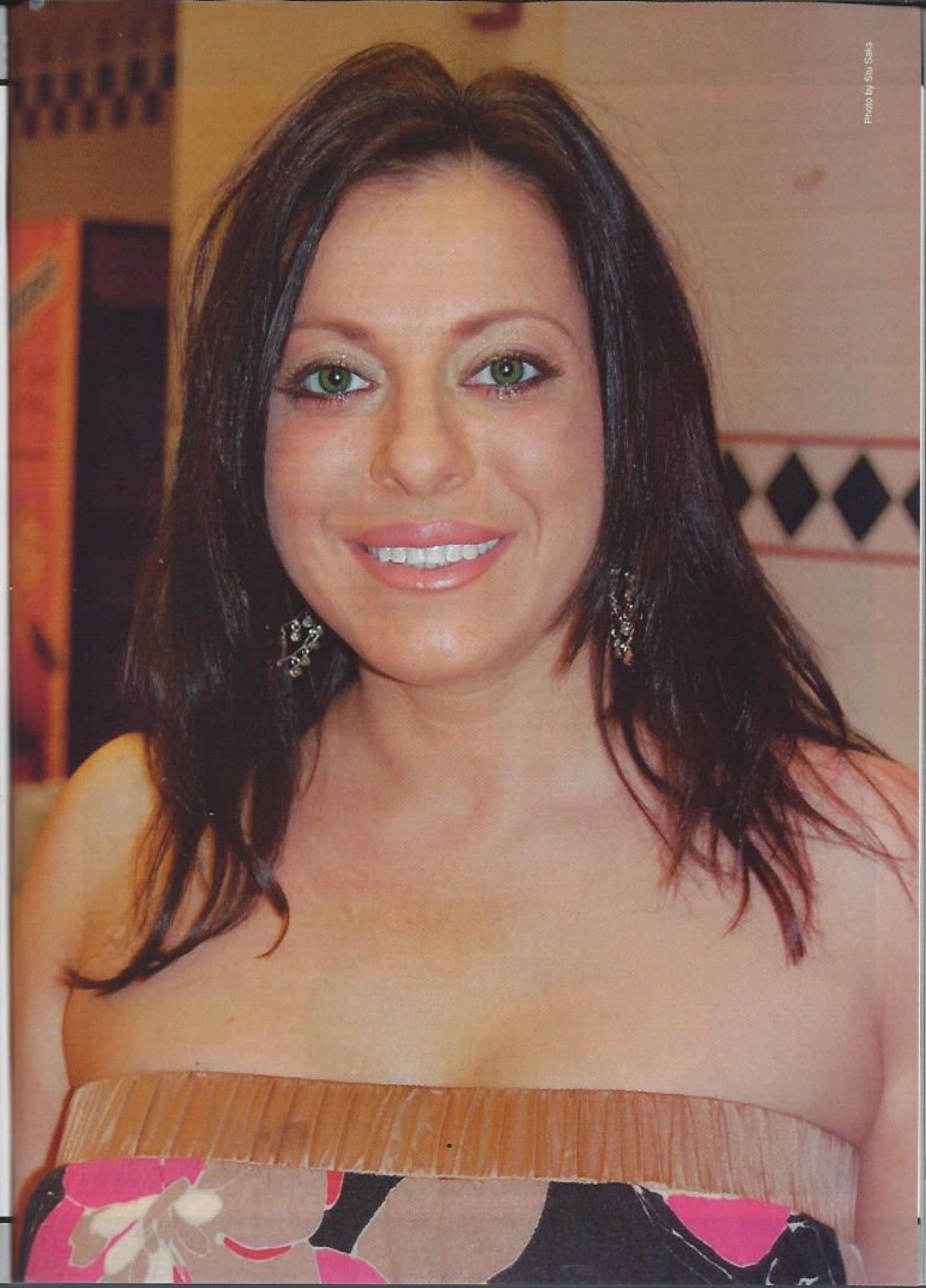
A: No, never in my career have I been a babyface.

Q: Never?

A: No, I'm a horrible, horrible babyface. They tried to switch me once and I switched myself back in the middle of the match (laughs). Being a heel is my natural talent. My job in the business was not to be Sable or Torrie Wilson. I was a hand in my industry, I knew what my spot was, and my job was to make them huge stars. In wrestling, either the veteran or the heel leads the match. I like being the heel because I'm a control freak. The way women went in and out of the industry, I was usually the veteran also, so it worked out really great for me. So I never, ever was a babyface.

Q: Well, you're not so bad these days. Before we get much further, I'd like to ask you about Wrestlers Rescue. Give us a summary of how that got started, and whom you've helped over the years.

A: I started a foundation called Wrestlers Rescue in 2008, and I raise money for the healthcare needs of retired wrestlers. Many of their injuries and ailments come years after they're done with the ring, when they're no longer under contract to someone. We recently did a fundraiser for Jimmy Snuka.



We've raised \$24,000 for him. He's just had a full ankle replacement and extensive ligament repair in his foot. Fortunately, he had health insurance. Most people don't have health insurance in wrestling because they're uninsurable. So the money we've raised for him is so he can pay his bills while he's healing and away from the public.

Wrestlers Rescue addresses two vicious cycles in the industry. The first is injury-related. People work, they get injured, they'll work despite the injury, they'll take pills to mask the injury, and, unfortunately, some of them get addicted to pills. But that cycle of working with injuries occurs because people are afraid of losing their spots—this business is about spots, positions, and timing.



Two very important men in Dawn Marie's life and career are Pat "Simon Diamond" Kenney (above), to whom she was engaged for several years, and ECW owner Paul Heyman (below), who gave her her break in the business and helped her find the confidence to succeed.

The second is the age cycle. This business takes people in their youth, and, if you're lucky enough, you make it. You think you're virile, young, and indestructible, and have the attitude "that's not going to happen to me." You start getting older, a new generation comes in, and you teach a new generation how to be stars, and you're weaned out. Because they take us in our youth and then we're gone in our 40s, and that's much earlier for women, there's this ignorance. The rest of the world doesn't think we have any life skills, and we don't think we have anything to put down on a resume. Do I put down that I was a professional wrestler for the last 17 years? I went on an interview and a guy actually asked me if I was a mud wrestler. I was like, "Okay, this interview is over," and I got up and left.

Q: Do you mean it's ignorance on the part of the people doing the job interviews, because they don't know what professional wrestlers are or what they do?

A: They don't understand what we do. It's also our ignorance because we don't know how to convert the skills we've learned into a resume that reflects those skills. We've managed our own careers in the business—as our own secretary, our own agent, our own personal trainer. We tend to push those skills aside and not give ourselves the credit we are due. That's because, in this industry, we're told how replaceable we are. "You'd better do this or else because you're replaceable"—which we are. After being told that over and over and over, you don't feel any worth. Successful wrestlers get this money when they're young, they think it will last forever, but they retire in their 40s. If you didn't do the right things with your money in your youth, then you're kind of screwed because you still have a long life to live. Does that make sense, the second cycle?



"What I did with my character was look around and watch the people who would do things that annoyed me. I knew that if it annoyed me, then it would annoy everybody else."

Q: Absolutely.

A: Returning to the real world isn't easy. I know a lot of the guys have that problem. We shouldn't have the losses like Chris Kanyon, who was depressed because he didn't know how to fit back in, or Mike Awesome, who killed himself because he just couldn't find his place back in the world. Those are very sad, extreme cases, but they're not the only two people who have suffered from that. I suffered from it.

Q: If I recall correctly, the genesis of Wrestlers Rescue had to do with The Iron Sheik. Is that true?

A: Yes, it is true, and it goes back to what we were just talking about. I was in Chicago at an appearance and he was at a table across from me. He was falling asleep at the table. At first, the wrestler in me giggled. Then, all of a sudden, the mother and the human being said, "Oh, my God, that's really sad." Here was a man who should have been enjoying the fruits of his labor, and, instead, he's falling asleep while peddling pictures.

Q: It's sad when you consider that he was such a serious person when he was younger, an athlete in Iran and a well-respected trainer in this country.

A: Yes. After that happened, he was wheeled to me by his agent. I've known Sheiky for 17 years, and, to this day, he calls me *Donna Marie*. So he goes, "Donna Marie, watch Sheiky's pictures, so nobody steals them!" There are only two private things you do in this world, and that's having sex with someone and going to the bathroom. He was being wheeled to the bathroom by his agent because he needed a double-knee replacement. That's the moment it really hit me. I was almost ashamed to be in the business.

Then there are a lot of things I'm doing other than Wrestlers Rescue. My business partner and I own MUDA Multimedia Entertainment. We're working on a project called *Keep the Peace*. Do you remember *We Are The World*?

Q: Yes.

A: My partner is a singer-songwriter, and the project will include a music video and documentary. The goal is to tour continuously with three different sets of artists until our men and women come home. It's a peace rally with music. We're going to use the proceeds to rehabilitate the homes of our disabled veterans that are coming home from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Q: I gather all of this keeps you very busy.

A: Yeah, plus I have two kids. I have a six-year-old boy named Matthew and a three-year-old girl named Katie. And they're a handful.



Photo by Frank Viucci

Managing ECW tag team champions Justin Credible and Lance Storm was very fulfilling for Dawn Marie. In particular, she was very tight with Storm, whom she referred to as "my Lance."

Q: How long have you been married now?

A: We got married in 2005, so it's been seven years. His name is Matt Damatta.

Q: Let's go back to the very beginning. I assume you grew up in the Northeast. Were you a WWF fan growing up? Did you watch wrestling?

A: My father, my uncle, my grandfather, and my brother would watch the MSG shows on TV. I was jealous because my brother was eight years older than me and my uncle used to take him to MSG. I used to get upset, so, one time, I got my dad to take me to a house show in Perth Amboy, New Jersey. Pedro Morales was wrestling Larry Zbyszko, and I was so excited. By the way, I'm the DDP of women because I'm a lot older than people think I am. I got my break much later in life. I'm 41 now.

Q: Something tells me you must've got good grades in school. Did you?

A: No, I was a horrible student. You want to know when I got good grades? When I paid for them (*laughs*). I was bad in school. I was very bored in school, and I think it was because I had ADD. I wasn't diagnosed with ADD until a few years ago. I left high school when I was younger, and I was homeless at 17. I started going to a community college when I was 19, thinking I should get my life together. I went to Middlesex County College. I chose to go back to school and make myself a better person—and I became a better student.

Q: What kind of career did you have in mind back then?

A: After Middlesex, I went to NYB Business School and later became an appraiser for commercial investments. My professor loved me, and I was lucky enough to become a director at an international real estate consulting firm at 24 years old.

Q: That's quite a step up from 17 and homeless.

A: My office overlooked St. Patrick's Cathedral. I could watch the parades from my office window. I had it made. But you know what: I cried every day going to work. I hated it. This is what I worked for? I had done what I was supposed to do, but I was unhappy and miserable. I also used to do some modeling and acting, and gentleman named Jonathan Gold came to my house because I was signing up some posters. He talked about doing some promotional work for WWE, particularly for its shows in Elizabeth, New Jersey. I hadn't watched wrestling in years, but I told him how I used to watch with my dad and my uncle. Every time WrestleMania came around, I would start cleaning the house, trying to coerce my dad into buying the pay-per-view. I told Jonathan that I could be the next Elizabeth! I was being stupid, showing how ignorant I was. There's nothing like going to the top, right?

So I was just rambling, and Jonathan took me seriously. He called up Cousin Luke, who was planning a small independent show. He asked Luke to

get me on the show, and he called me up. I said, "Jonathan, I was only kidding. I can't wrestle. I'm not doing it." He said, "Just do it for me, as a favor, and you don't have to do it again." I became a manager and created this little character. Right away, I wanted to be a heel, because I was a Sherri Martel fan. For my first match, I managed Tony Atlas against Jimmy Snuka.

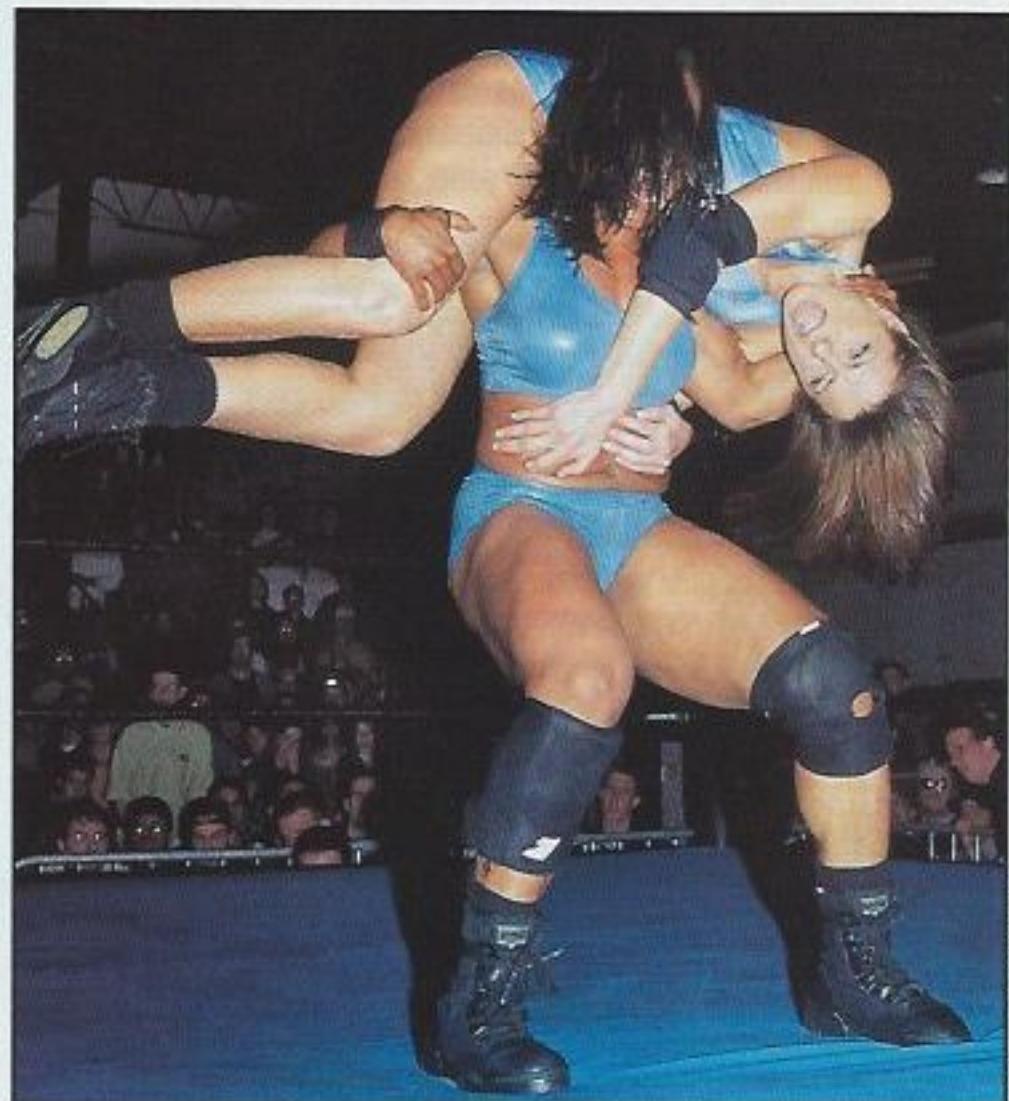
Q: Oh, my goodness—two big names right out of the chute.

A: They'd been off TV for a long time, but, to me, they were still main-eventing MSG, because that was the last time I had watched it! I've been in many arenas in my years, and I can still see that gym crystal-clear in my mind today. I walked out through the curtain. You know those movie scenes where everything stops? I still remember the people's faces. I swear, on my kids, that's what happened. I thought, *Oh, God, this is what I'm supposed to do for the rest of my life.*

That was on a Friday. On Monday, I called my job and said I was quitting. My supervisor said, "Are you kidding me?" She tried to talk me out of it. She said, "You're making a big mistake. You're 24 years old, you're director of a firm, we gave you this chance, and we believe in you." I said, "Thank you, I know, I know—and I'm sorry."

Q: Did you tell her what you were leaving it for?

A: No. Then she goes, "We'll talk about it when you come in and get your stuff." And I said to her, "No, throw them out.



Photos by Frank Vitucci

Entering the sport with absolutely no wrestling training, Dawn Marie got some on-the-job training from Jazz, one of the toughest women in the business (above). Fortunately, Storm was on hand to lend some assistance when needed (right).

"Successful wrestlers get this money when they're young, they think it will last forever, but they retire in their 40s. If you didn't do the right things with your money in your youth, then you're kind of screwed because you still have a long life to live."

I'm never coming back." So I don't have any of my diplomas, my licenses, nothing—I never went back. My father wanted to kill me.

Q: He probably thought you were running away to join the circus.

A: Well, I did. I went back to the bars where I used to bartend and got my jobs back. I started working the independent circuit, and I would drive anywhere from Michigan to Florida by myself. I took any booking I could get. Jimmy Snuka, who I'd met at my first show ever, took me by the hand and helped me. I was Jimmy Snuka's first female valet ever. I remember sitting in a diner with him. I looked at him and asked, "You don't hit on me. You don't expect anything from me. I feel comfortable with you. Why do you help me?" And he said, "Sister ... because this is my life."



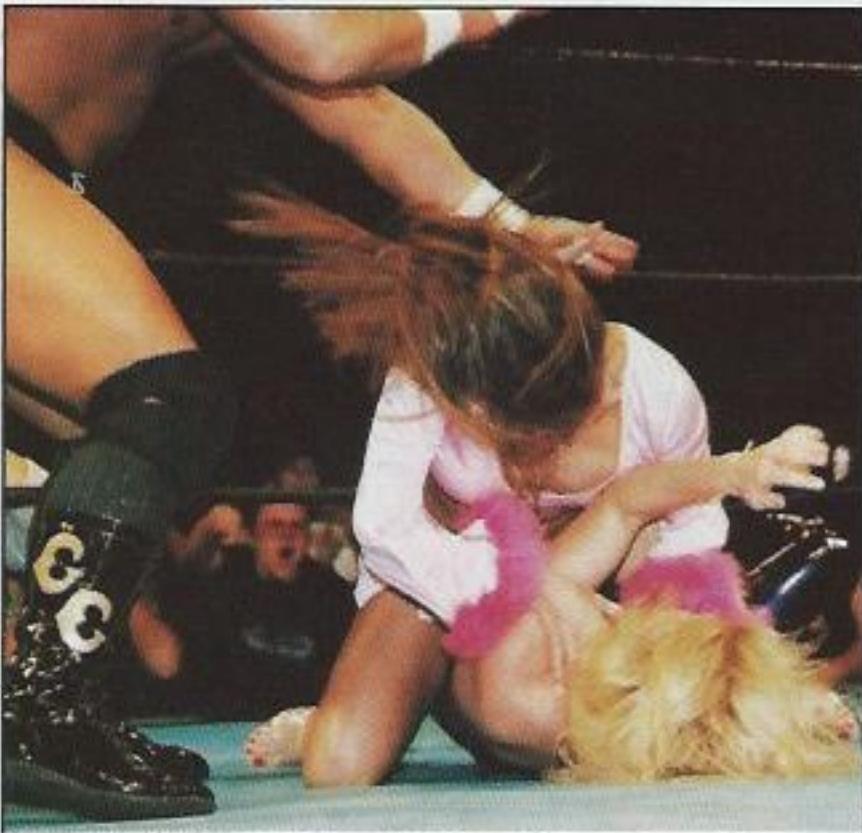
Q: That was deep.

A: He said, "I see something in you. If I don't give you my life and teach you, then it dies with me. And my life has meant nothing."

Q: And your relationship with him has come full circle.

A: Jimmy's been like a dad to me. He introduced me to the photographers who worked for PW and the other magazines. He





The bulk of Dawn's physical involvement was catfights against the likes of Tammy Sutch (above) and Francine (right). Though Tammy was a friend at the time and remains so to this day, Dawn Marie has no use for Francine.

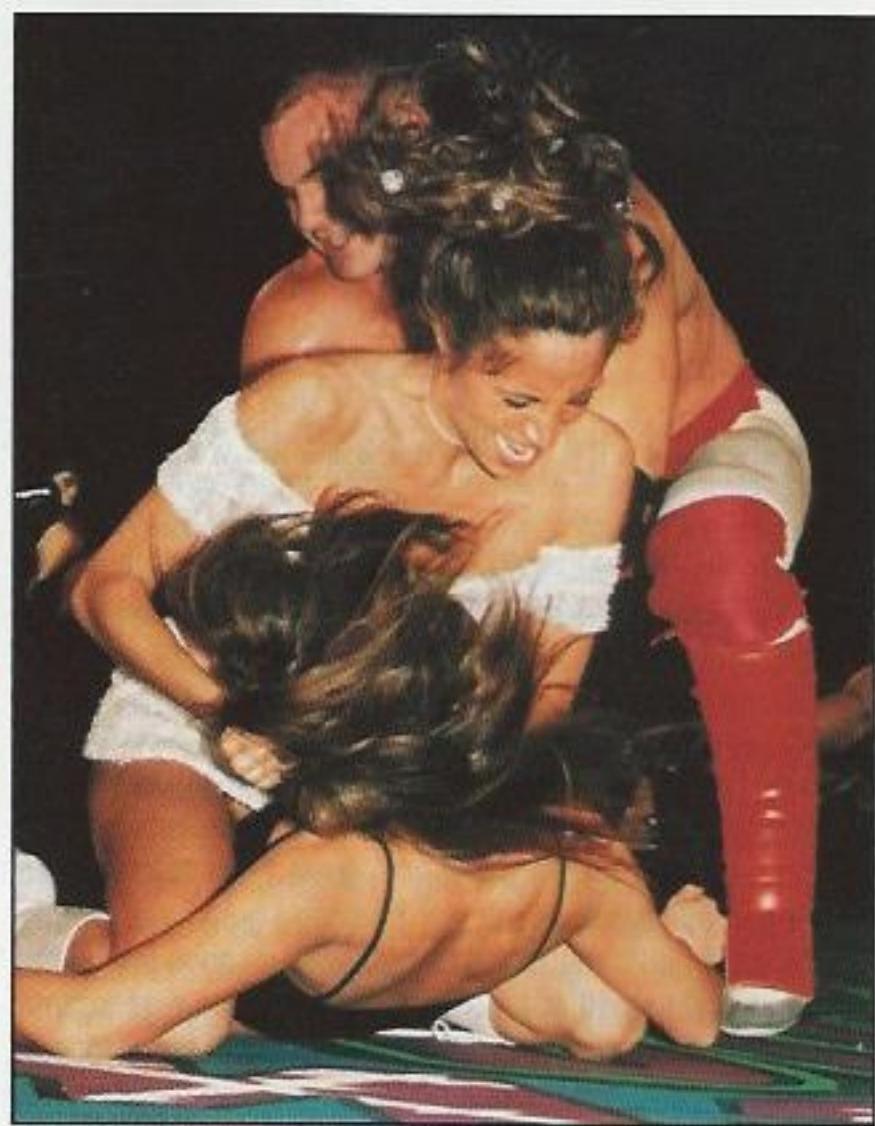
asked them to consider putting me in the magazines. I ended up in the magazines just about every month, so that gave me a big boost. Then I did my part, doing my \$25 gigs and \$50 gigs. In 1995, I got a call from Buh Buh Ray Dudley to do a one-day stint with Sunny in ECW. Back then, the girls weren't as risqué as they are now, except for Sable coming out with those latex hands on her boobs. Anyway, he asked me if I would mind being stripped down to my bra and panties.

Q: That must've been the first time that phrase had been uttered in wrestling history.

A: Probably! I didn't know what to say. I was about to call Lance Diamond, because he was my best friend in the business at the time. Then I remembered a lesson that I learned from one of the old-timers: You do what you're asked to the best of your ability, and that's how you will become great in this industry. That night, I went up to Buh Buh and said I would do it. And Tammy Lynn Sutch ripped my dress off at the ECW Arena in my first match there.

Q: I'm sure that made you an instant hit.

A: Yeah, because it just hadn't been done before. And Lance Storm and I had such chemistry right from the beginning. Buh Buh called me the next week and said, "Do you want to go to New Orleans?" I said, "Sure, where do I pick up my plane tickets?" He said to me, "Who the hell do you think you are? You did one show and you think you're a princess now? If you want the shot, go get a pen and I'll give you the names of the three buildings and the days you need to be there. If you're there, you'll get the job. If not, I guess you didn't want it." Well, I was there and I did the three days. After that, Paul [Heyman] called me up and created a spot for me because he loved the chemistry between Lance and me.



Q: Lance seems like he would be a steady guy in what would otherwise be a chaotic environment.

A: I still call him *my* Lance. We used to laugh in WWE because I would ask for my Lance. "Have you seen my Lance?" At that time, we were working against Francine and Shane Douglas. Lance was a natural teacher. Every night after the match, he would sit with me for literally 45 minutes to an hour. We would go through the match from beginning to end. We would talk about timing, positioning, why this happened, why this went wrong, and why this went well. That was an education I couldn't have got anywhere else. A pet peeve of mine is when a girl asks about her spot and then walks away. To me, you need to know the match from the beginning to end. Because if I'm watching it for the first time, how can I react to it before the fans do? Does that make sense?

Q: Yes, because you haven't had time to consider what you're going to do in response.

A: Exactly. So Lance would always make sure I knew that match from beginning to end. If I don't know what's going to happen in the ring, and something goes awry, and my job as manager is to distract the referee or the fans, then how can I cover a mistake if I don't know it's a mistake? So I was very fortunate in the beginning because I had Lance and I had Shane. Don't ask me about Francine, because I don't like her.

Q: Then let me ask you about Tammy Sutch. She had just left the WWF under somewhat controversial circumstances. Was she easy or difficult to work with? Did you have any chemistry with her?

"I cried every day going to work. I hated it. This is what I worked for? I had done what I was supposed to do, but I was unhappy and miserable."

A: I had great chemistry with Tammy. To this day, she's still my friend. She really helped me a lot and she was very welcoming to me. Because Tammy was coming off WWE, I was no threat to her.

Q: One of my most vivid memories of the era was Lita—as Miss Congeniality—holding down Tammy while you paddled her on national television.

A: Oh, yeah.

Q: Then you knocked out Miss Congeniality with the paddle!

A: Yes, I did, and she's one of my best friends in the business. How bad is that? There's nothing like beating up your best friend.

Q: That had to be the apex—the most fun times.

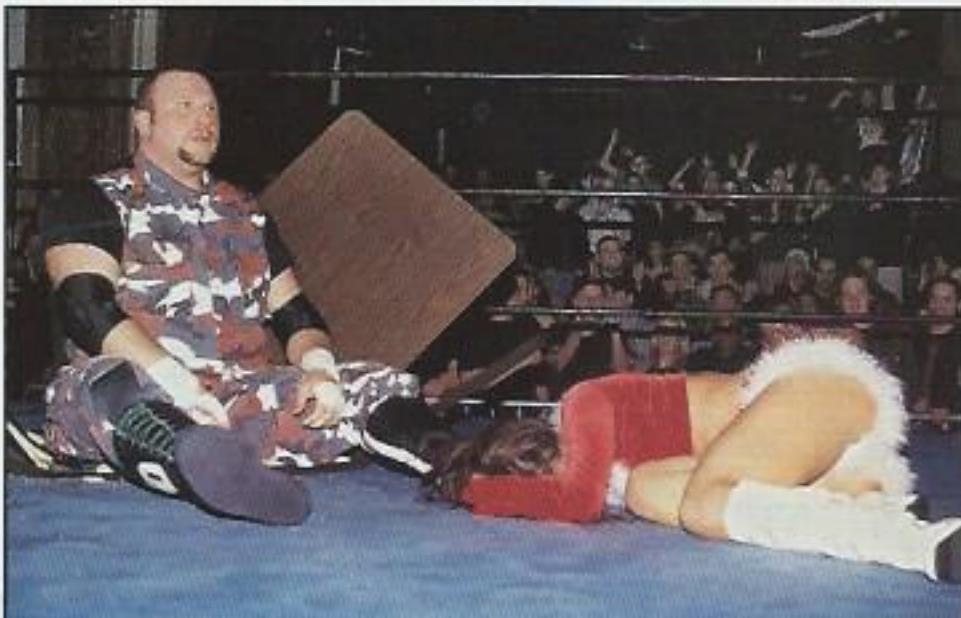
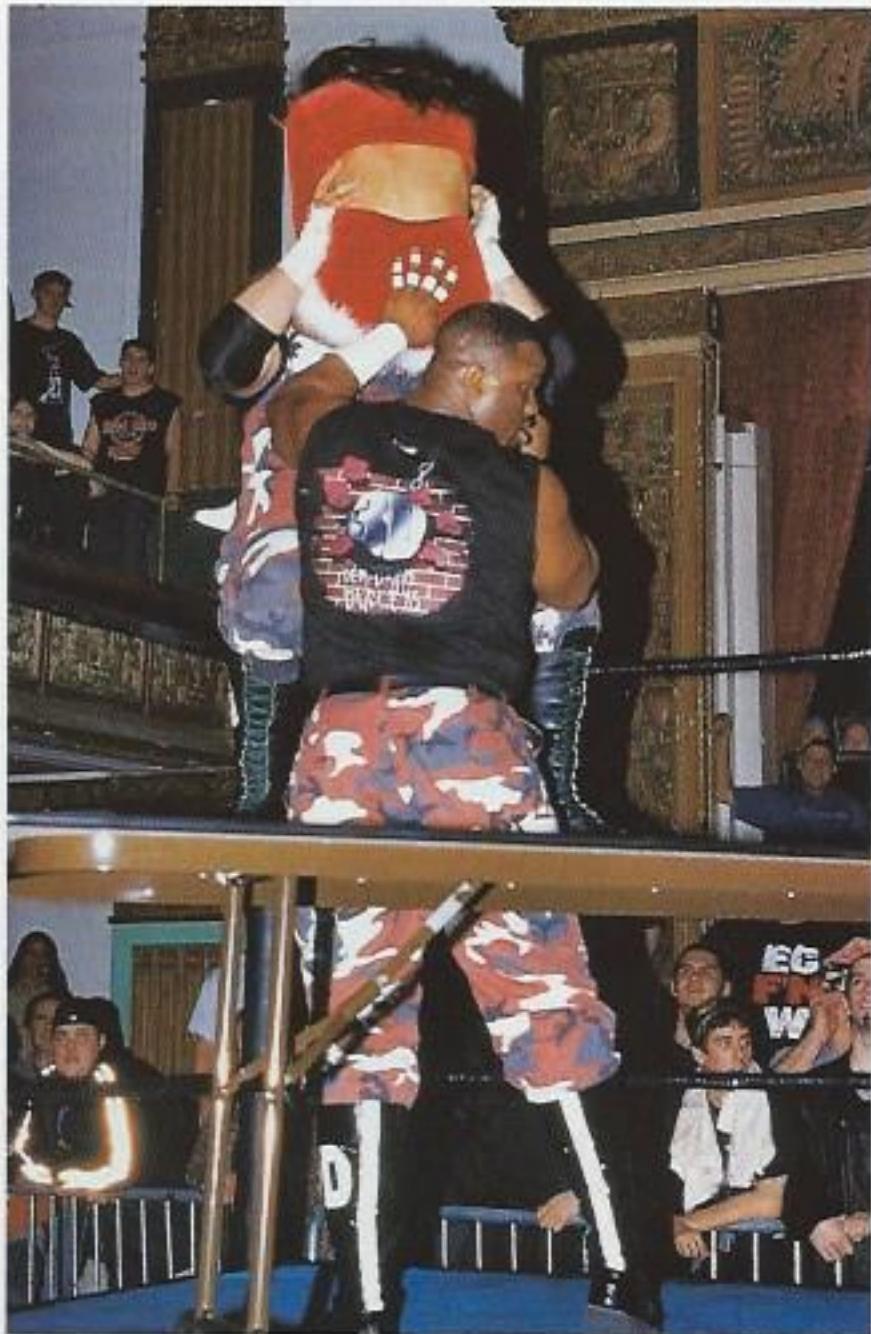
A: What I loved about ECW is that we were all so young and we all wanted the same thing and we all worked so hard



to get it. We were still trying to prove ourselves worthy. We had this pool of amazing talent that Paul put together, and Taz used to call it the Land of Misfit Toys. We were the ones that no one else wanted, but we had the talent, and Paul was the only one who could see it and get it out of us. To me, Paul's genius was watching you perform and showcasing your strengths, but, instead of hiding your weaknesses, he would make you work on them—he wouldn't allow you to just hide them.

Q: It sounds like he actually worked with you, which a lot of bookers and promoters don't do.

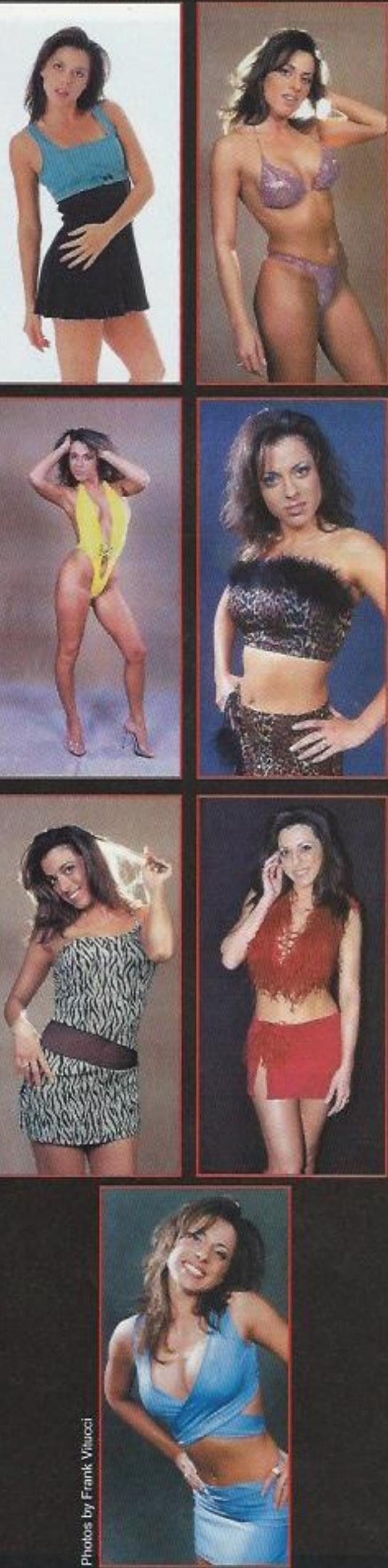
A: By emphasizing your strengths, he allowed you to build this inner confidence while you worked on your weaknesses. After a while, I felt invincible because I was strong in my craft and I felt that I had someone who believed in me enough to help me, teach me, and develop me. He knew everybody like the back of his hand. If I'd be in gorilla, for example, and if I was nervous about going out and



If you were going to compete in ECW, you had better be able to brace yourself for some violence. That included Dawn Marie, who is tabled by the Dudleyz.

A PHOTOGRAPHER'S DREAM

Photos by Frank Vielucci



doing something, he would come up to me and whisper something in my ear, and I'd be like, "You're right, I can do this. I'm ready to go. Is it my turn yet?" He knew just what to say and when to say it. I love Paul. I could give you a 16-page interview just on Paul.

Q: That gives people a different sense of him because when people think of Paul Heyman, they think of the bombastic idea guy, not someone who would work with someone and finesse their strengths and weaknesses.

A: People can say what they want about Paul, good or bad, but Paul was a genius at what he did. Paul has created more stars in this business than anyone else, when you consider how many appeared in ECW and went from ECW to WWE. Paul saw star qualities in people that others wouldn't have given a second thought about. I mean, look at what Paul did with Brock Lesnar in WWE. I'm not one that drank Paul's Kool-Aid, but even if people have ill feelings about him, they can't take his achievements away from him.

Q: You and Pat Kenney (Lance Diamond) were an item for some time. Having a boyfriend in the lockerroom ... did that make things easier or harder for you?

A: That all depends on who your boyfriend is (*laughs*). Pat was on the lower echelon of the card, so it didn't make it any easier for me. I was a bigger star than Pat was, so it did nothing for me for him to be my boyfriend. Francine was dating Tommy Dreamer for so long, she could treat anybody any way she wanted and get away with it.

Q: Is that what provided so much fuel for your catfights?

A: Ninety percent of the catfights between Francine and I were real.

Q: I got that feeling. Do you remember the wildest one you had with her?

A: Yes, in Canada. You know how girls take their shoes off and go barefoot to do their spots? I never did that because that was telegraphing what I was going to do next—I took my craft very seriously. I was behind the curtain in Canada and took my shoes off to get ready and do a run-in. Paul looked at me, looked at my shoes, and he goes, "What are you going to do?" I said to him, "I love you. I won't screw up your show, but I've had enough of her. That was the catfight of catfights. It was pretty bad."

Q: Did you get the upper hand in that catfight for a change?

A: Yes, they pulled me off her. I was sure that I would get fired, but that didn't happen.

Q: Was it an accumulation of things or a specific incident that sparked that?

A: It was an accumulation of years of taking it and taking it. She would refer to me as "she," "her," and "it" to my face. If we were talking about what to do for a match, she wouldn't say, "Hey, Dawn, I'm going to come in over here." She would be like, "Lance, can you tell her this?" When I was standing right there. Just stupid stuff like that. I used

"I went back to the bars where I used to bartend and got my jobs back. I started working the independent circuit, and I would drive anywhere from Michigan to Florida by myself."

to get really upset. Finally, Joey Styles saw me crying in the lockerroom that day in Canada. He goes, "What's wrong, Dawn?" I said, "I can't take it anymore." He said, "The company's going under. What does it matter? Do what you want."

Q: That's advice I wouldn't expect him to give.

A: Well, this was right at the end, when ECW was going down and people weren't getting paid. Francine and me ... that feud was legit.

Q: As far as being a manager in full flower, that would have to be the time you were managing The Impact Players, Lance Storm and Justin Credible. Is that when you felt you were at the top of your game?

A: Those were my happy days. I loved being in wrestling. I loved learning and working with Lance. I loved working for ECW and Paul Heyman.

Q: I always enjoyed that bratty debutante persona you had. I remember you used to yell, "I'm a star, I'm a star!" Where did you get that from?



A: I have no idea where I came up with that. I got a lot of my character traits from that movie *Clueless* and a lot from Chrissy Snow of *Three's Company*. Some of the stuff that used to come out of my mouth, we would just look at each other afterward. I would be so much into the character because I was an actress before I became a wrestler.

Dawn Marie opened up Michelle McCool's eyes to a few basic facts of life, including who and who not to trust. The two women would engage in a memorable feud.

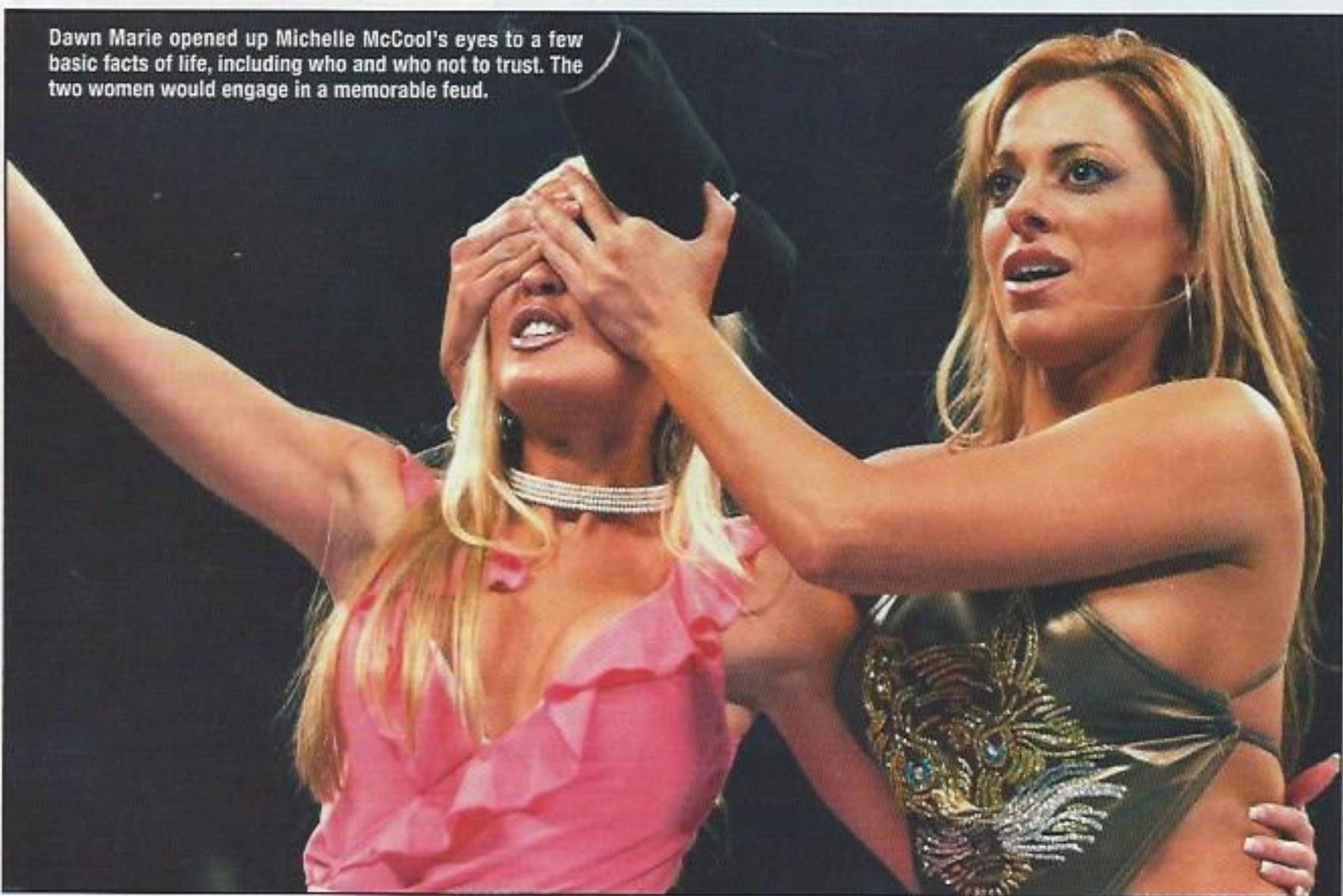
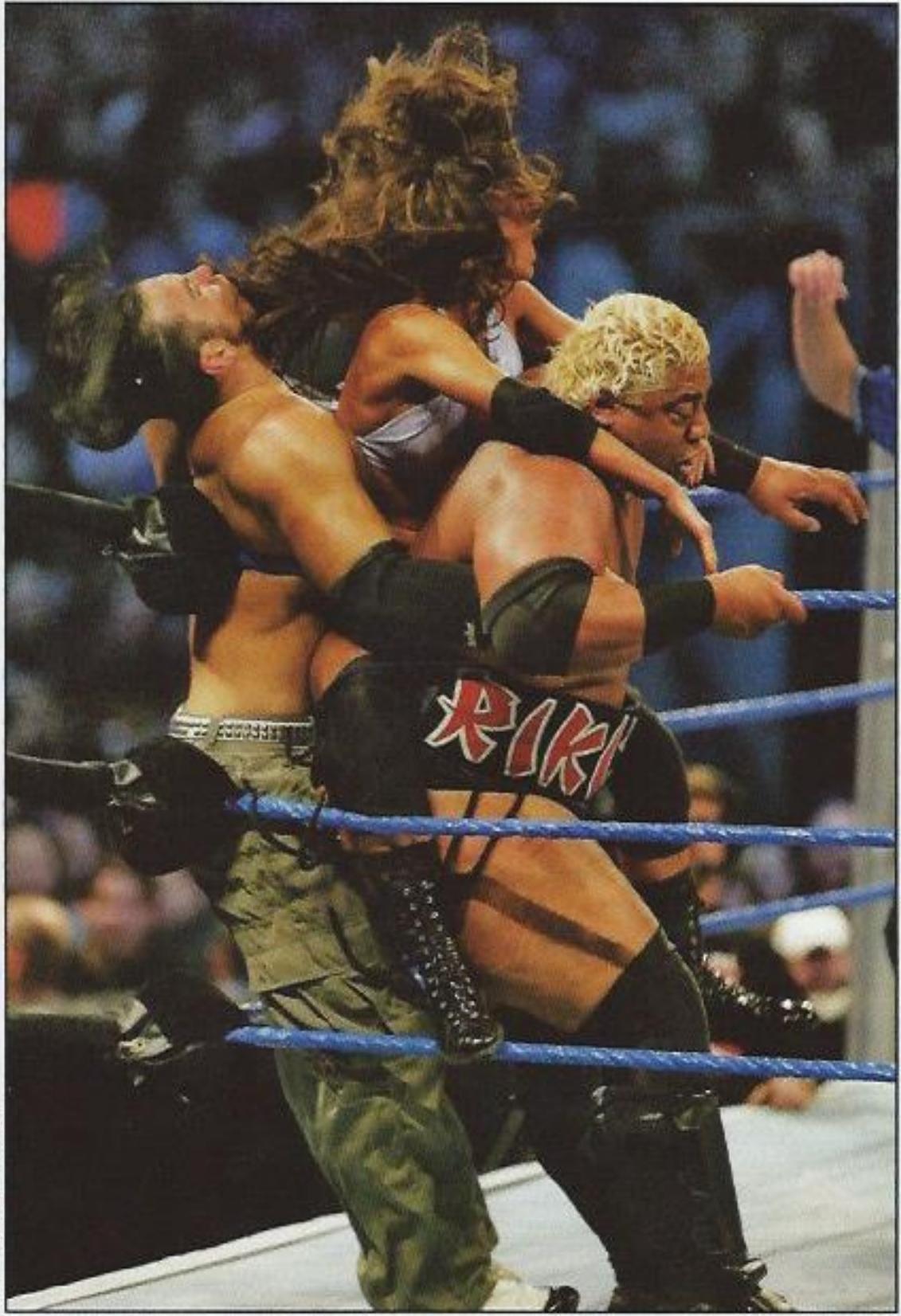


Photo by Duane Long



It was very easy for a beautiful woman to be caught up in the action in WWE, as the 120-pounder becomes the meat for a Matt Hardy/Rikishi sandwich.

Q: Obviously, you're best known for your time in ECW, but you were in WWE for an equal amount of time. Where do you think you did your better work?

A: I had the most fun in ECW because it was more of my own craft, being who I am. I loved working with Paul, with him saying, "I need you in Georgia for a 15-minute spot. You have 30 seconds for the promo—go!" To me, that was the craft. When I went to WWE, they gave you a script to follow, so, to me, it was just two different worlds. I loved my work in ECW, but I have to say my better work was in WWE, particularly the storyline with Torrie Wilson's dad. And, in WWE, I had to wrestle, so there were more dimensions to my job.

Q: That makes sense. How did you come in contact with WWE?

A: I know, right? Was he the first ever to be killed off?

Q: Some people have disappeared, but ...

A: Yeah, I was really upset about it. From what I understand, there was a lot more that was supposed to come afterward, but someone decided to squash it. But that was a Paul Heyman creation.

Q: It was definitely original. You and Torrie had one of the longer Diva feuds. Didn't you think that the wicked stepmother aspect made it more original than most storylines?

A: Yeah, of course, definitely.

Q: What would you say was your highest-pressure situation in WWE? Was it one of the WrestleManias ... when did you feel you were on the spot?

A: You know what my biggest regret in wrestling is? Let me

Paul Heyman really wanted me. I was learning to wrestle when ECW was going under. I could have kept doing catfights with Francine, or I could be great by learning how to wrestle, which is where the business was going. Paul Heyman knew that, so he wanted me to work out hard and learn how to wrestle, and then send him footage and pictures of myself afterward. Paul hand-delivered it, and I got a phone call. Paul was pivotal. He's the one who got me my job.

Q: Did anyone have any ideas about changing your character or not having you come in as Dawn Marie? Or was that accepted from the beginning?

A: They told me from the beginning that they didn't want that ditzy character. They wanted women to be perceived as strong, individual women, so I had to create a new character, which was sort of like Susan Lucci, a soap opera-ish type villain.

Q: You mentioned the angle with Al Wilson, which is one of the more memorable angles of all-time. Tell me a little bit about Al Wilson. He was the real-life father of Torrie Wilson, but he wasn't a performer. How do you think he performed under pressure?

A: I think he was great. He always had a great face on, always happy. He was thrown into some crazy stuff.

Q: With millions of people watching. Talk about performing under pressure, he, of course, died during your honeymoon tryst. When you found out that Creative was going to kill off Al Wilson, what was your reaction? Was it like, really? Somebody's going to be killed off in wrestling?

"What I loved about ECW is that we were all so young and we all wanted the same thing and we all worked so hard to get it. We were still trying to prove ourselves worthy."

give you a good piece of trivia. My biggest regret in wrestling is that I never did a WrestleMania. I was at a WrestleMania, but never performed at WrestleMania. But my most stressful moment was when *Smackdown* was live and I had to get married.

Q: I guess weddings make all women nervous.

A: Yeah, but they had given me my script at 5:00 at night and we were going live at 7:00, and I had to get dressed in a wedding gown. As I was walking out to the gorilla, Vince [McMahon] came over and gave me a big hug and a pat on the shoulder, and said, "You're going to be great. You make sure you get AI through the whole thing. It's on you. But, don't worry, you're going to be great." I don't know whether that was a compliment or a threat (*laughs*). That was really stressful for me because that was live and there was so much verbiage, and then I had to get AI through it. What if he forgot stuff?

Q: Oh, yes, I can understand why that would be stressful.

A: So that was my most nerve-wracking moment. My most memorable moment, when I really knew I had made it in the business, was when I was standing underneath the TitanTron and I was going to wrestle Mae and Moolah. I went in first because they were going to come out second.

Q: You probably felt like Wendi Richter.

A: Yeah, and I did the job also! Poor Wendi.

Q: You mentioned Vince a while ago. What were your interactions with him like?

A: I have a lot of respect for Vince and the entire family because they asked us to do a lot, but they didn't expect us to do anything more than they would do themselves. When we went to Iraq, Vince went with us. When they pushed us to the limit, they were pushing themselves just as hard and just as crazy.

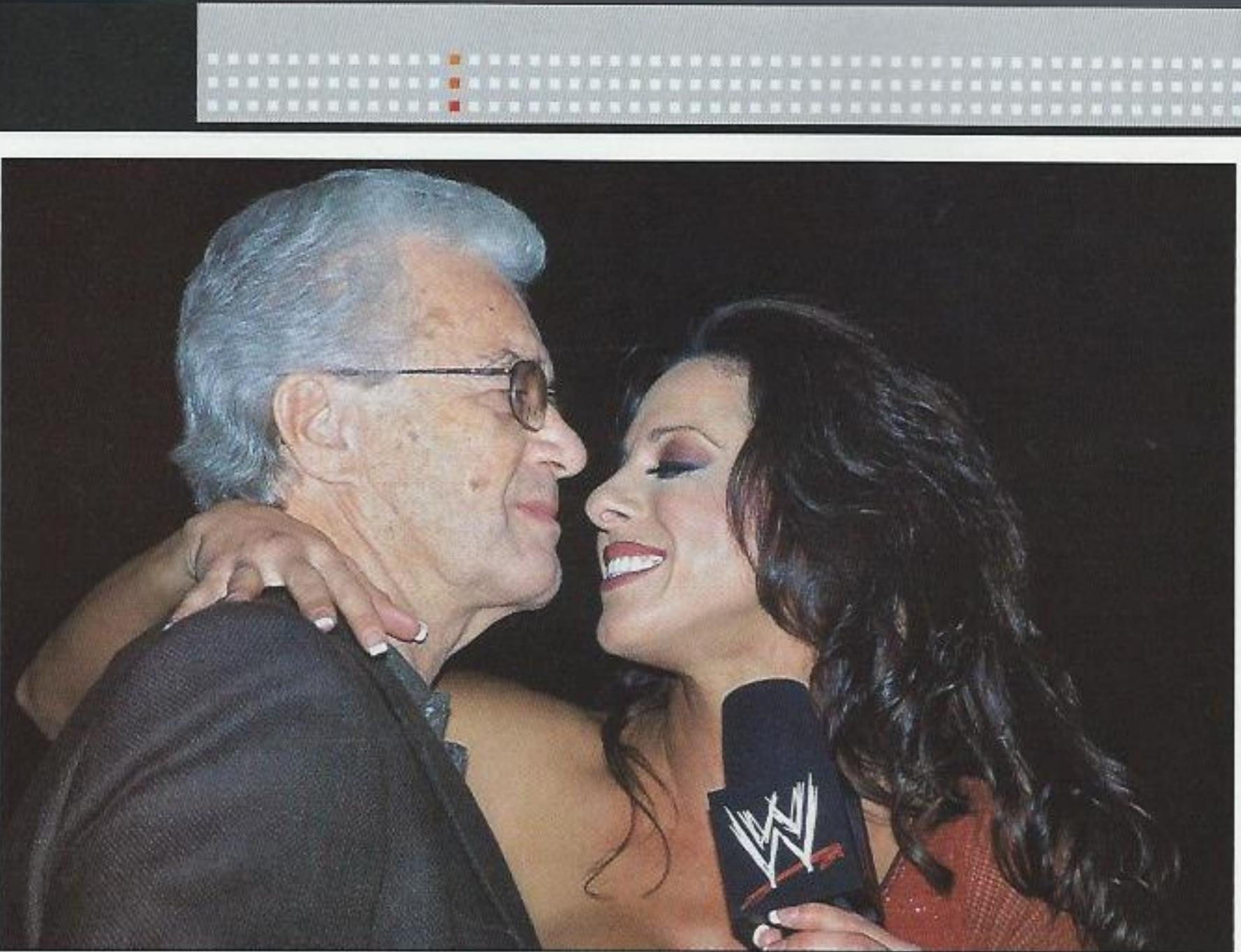
Q: And they've definitely made themselves look foolish from time to time ...

A: Exactly. So how can you say you don't want to look stupid or bombastic? Well, they've made themselves look stupid and bombastic. How can you say no to something they've asked you to do that's within reason when they've done even more? So, to me, they lead by example and I have a lot of respect for Vince because what president or CEO or owner of a company that huge is available to you? At any TV show, I could walk up to Vince and have a conversation with him if I had to talk to him about something. I'm not saying he'll give me a half-hour, but if I had something on



Dawn Marie never wanted to be considered sweet, but what else can she be after wrestling Torrie Wilson in a vat of chocolate?

Photo by Scott Cunningham



In her most memorable WWE storyline, Dawn Marie flirts with Al Wilson, the father of Torrie Wilson (above). The two would later marry (left), but poor Al would face his demise while over-exerting himself on the honeymoon. Their personal grudge would, naturally, come to a head in a wrestling ring (opposite page).

my mind, I could ask Vince if he had a moment, and he would say sure. I'd get at least five minutes.

Q: He wouldn't tell you to go to Human Resources.

A: If it were something that he couldn't resolve in five minutes, he would tell us to call Johnny [Laurinaitis] and make an appointment and come up to Stamford. I have respect for that.

Q: I understand. Your feud with Jackie Gayda over the affections of Charlie Haas ... I recall that you beat Jackie, which was a rare win for you, at Armageddon. Then Charlie broke it off with both of you. Is that the way it was supposed to end?

A: That storyline was supposed to go further, but they just cut it short for some reason. One of us might have done something to annoy someone.

Q: It was almost too tidy an ending.

A: It was weird—I don't know. That was the same thing with the Torrie Wilson angle, too. All of a sudden, it just ended ... but that was my fault.

Q: You think so?

A: Yeah, I got into a bar fight in Louisville, Kentucky.

Q: Of course. What else would you do in Louisville?

A: The boys got into the fight first, and the girl who started it was standing there all proud because the boys were fighting over her. I decided that wasn't right. The guys can't do any-

"People can say what they want about Paul, good or bad, but Paul was a genius at what he did. Paul has created more stars in this business than anyone else."

.....

thing to her, but a girl can. So I walked over and punched her in the face. Yeah, I know that wasn't very nice. I had a few drinks in me. I believe that was the reason why they cut the Torrie Wilson angle short. I'm not sure, but it was around the same time, so I think that was my punishment.

Q: It sounds like you had a Francine flashback.

A: It was a *stupid* flashback. When you're in that world, and I'm not bragging about it and it's not something I'm proud of, that's what happens. I take responsibility for it. But it goes back to that life cycle I was talking about earlier. You're so wrapped up in that world 275 days a year, you become that. You forget there's a real life and a real world out there. It was so stupid of me to walk over to someone and punch them in the face. Who am I to do that? It's so immature and it's wrong on so many levels. But because you're in that world, for some weird reason, for that moment, you think it's okay to do that. I wish I could take it back, but I can't.



Q: If I recall correctly, your last appearance occurred when you managed Lance Storm against Chris Jericho at One Night Stand. Didn't you think that was an appropriate end for you, considering you were with Lance Storm early in your career and the fact that he and Jericho used to be tag team partners?



Photo by Gary Dineen



At the urging of Heyman, Dawn Marie worked hard to improve her wrestling skills and make herself more marketable. In a match for the affections of Charlie Haas, who served as referee, Dawn Marie beat Jackie Gayda at Armageddon 2004. Six months later, it would be Gayda who'd marry Haas.

A: I was pregnant.

Q: You were pregnant at that time?

A: I was the only pregnant woman to ever enter the ring. I was three months pregnant, actually. That was the best sendoff ever. I didn't know I was going to be fired, but, for my last match with WWE, I couldn't ask for anything better than for it to have been with Lance—just because we weren't allowed to work together throughout the whole time I was there. My first and last big match was with Lance, my Lance.

Q: You mentioned your pregnancy. I understand that had something to do with your departure. What was the

timeline regarding the pregnancy and how much of that can you discuss?

A: When I got pregnant, they took me off the road because I couldn't wrestle and they wanted to try to think of something to do with me. Then I received a phone call stating that they couldn't think of anything creative for me, so they released me about a month later. That was the timeline.

Q: I suppose it was too late for it to be Al Wilson's baby.

A: Yeah, my character was so manipulative and out of sorts, we could've done a "Whose baby is that?" storyline. And not only that, but I had been in the industry for so many years, I knew how to cogitate, knew how to interview, and other things where they didn't have to see my belly. I could've been a backstage interviewer or something, but they didn't think they needed that at that moment.

Q: You ended up filing a lawsuit, correct?

A: I did sue the WWE for wrongful termination.

Q: Did you settle out of court on that one?

A: Yes. That's when I started Wrestlers Rescue. I wanted to make lemonade out of lemons.

Q: Do you keep in touch with anybody from your wrestling days on a friendly basis?

A: Oh, yeah, Nidia and Jackie Gayda are my best friends. Through Wrestlers Rescue, I do get to speak to a lot of people on a regular basis. So I'm very active in the business. I would say I'm more active today in the industry than I ever was. I'm just not on TV. I'm very active behind the scenes.

Q: One final question: Do you still accept phone calls from Paul Heyman?

A: I talk to Paul on a regular basis. Paul will be in my life for the rest of my life. I hold my friendship with Paul Heyman very dearly. □



Dawn is ever-grateful for the time and interest Jimmy Snuka gave her early in her career. Dawn's Wrestlers Rescue organization was able to raise \$24,000 to offset the costs of the "Superfly's" recent foot and ankle surgery. Here, the two pose with a soldier at a recent meet and greet.



Dawn Marie is no less active since her 2005 retirement, running Wrestlers Rescue, MUDA Multimedia Entertainment for the benefit of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans, and, of course, raising two kids.

Photo by Harry Burkett

DANGEROUS *Liaisons*

Can Paul Heyman Form A Super Stable In WWE?

Though he came back to WWE to help Brock Lesnar, Paul Heyman is now feeling the itch to once again do what he does best—guiding a stable of wrestlers to the top of a promotion. But whether Heyman will be able to scratch that itch in WWE remains to be seen

BY FRANK KREWDA

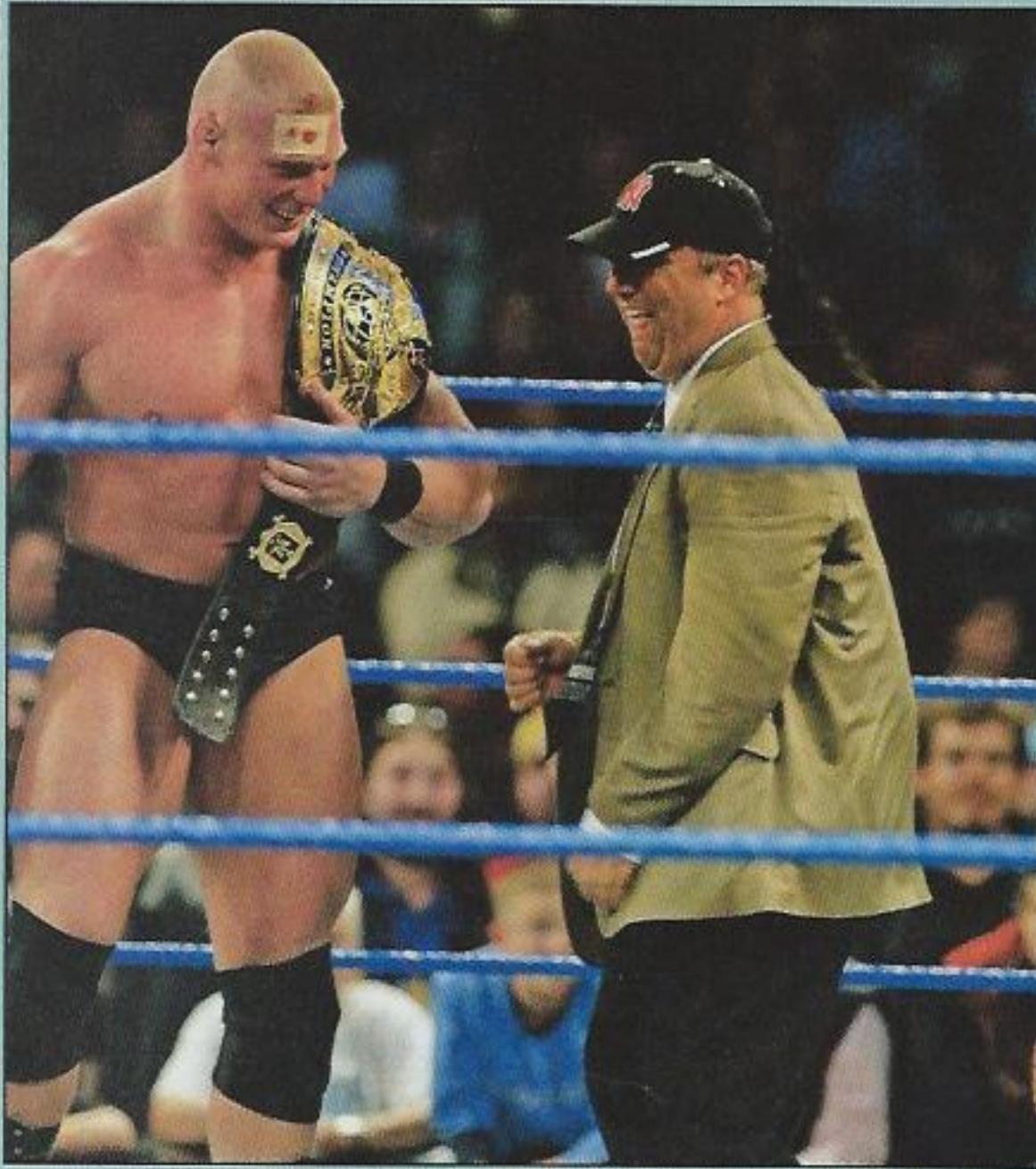
IF A MAN is lucky, he will be given an opportunity—usually after years of hard work—to toil at his job simply for the sheer pleasure it brings him. Being able to do what he loves just because he loves doing it is the reward for the time and effort he's dedicated to his career.

Paul Heyman has worked in just about every capacity in the wrestling business over the years—from taking

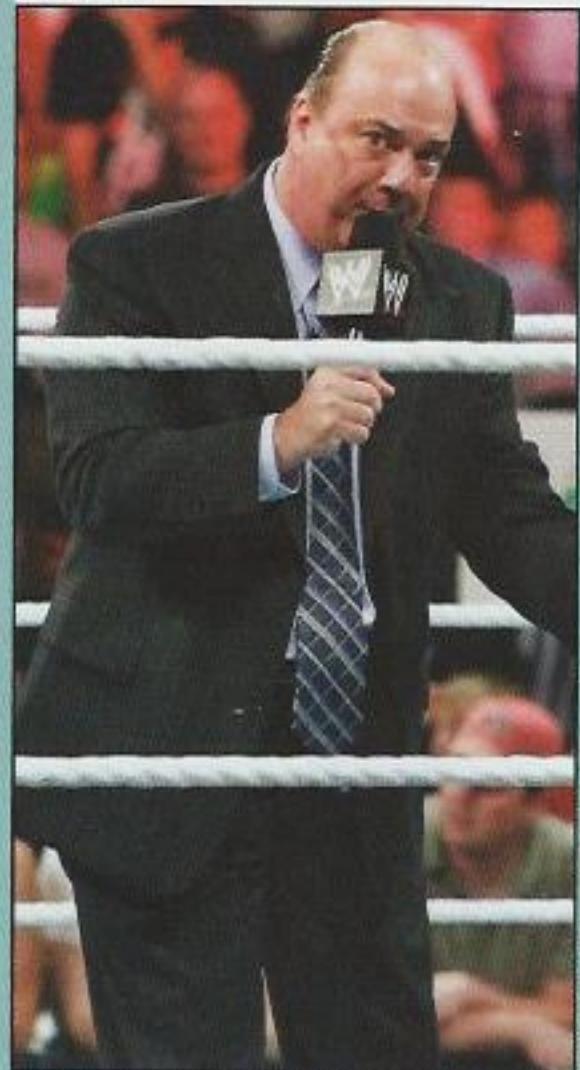


[THE WRESTLER]

35



Heyman led Lesnar to a WWE world title back in 2002 (left), and most recently returned to help Brock in his WWE contract dispute (below). However, WWE insiders say Heyman wants to do much more than help his friend.



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photos for this very magazine as a teen, to running ECW, one of the most influential promotions of all-time, to handling Brock Lesnar's business affairs. Heyman's contributions have been both outstanding and lasting. He was voted Manager of the Year by *PWI* readers in 1992 and inducted into the *Wrestling Observer Hall of Fame* in 2005.

Indeed, Heyman can look back at his career and be proud of what he has accomplished, especially in WCW during the early-1990s when he formed and led The Dangerous Alliance, widely recognized as the best faction ever (see sidebar).

Heyman returned to WWE in mid-April to act as Lesnar's legal representative in his ongoing business dispute with WWE. Over the past few months, however, he's surveyed the playing field and, according to insiders, is developing a plan that far exceeds his original purposes. Heyman, they say, has grown very nostalgic for his old managerial days and is determined to reprise the Paul E. Dangerously method of managing in WWE.

This claim should come as no surprise, for guiding wrestlers and tag teams to world titles—and all the scheming and intriguing that comes along with it—has always been what drives Heyman. It's the one aspect of pro wrestling he loves and misses most.

Make no mistake. Heyman came back to WWE to help his friend and client, Lesnar, in his time of need, and considered his return to be more of an obligation to Brock than an invitation to work at his life's passion. But now that Heyman's entrenched once again



Photo By George Napolitano

CM Punk and Randy Orton are reportedly very high on Heyman's managerial wish list. Heyman says neither man is fully appreciated by WWE management, and with them, he could reprise yet another version of The Dangerous Alliance.



Even before formally assembling The Dangerous Alliance in 1992, Paul Heyman showed his managerial chops by leading the Original Midnight Express—Randy Rose and Dennis Condrey—to the AWA World tag team title in the late-'80s (above). Arn Anderson called The Dangerous Alliance one of the greatest collections of talent in wrestling history (below).



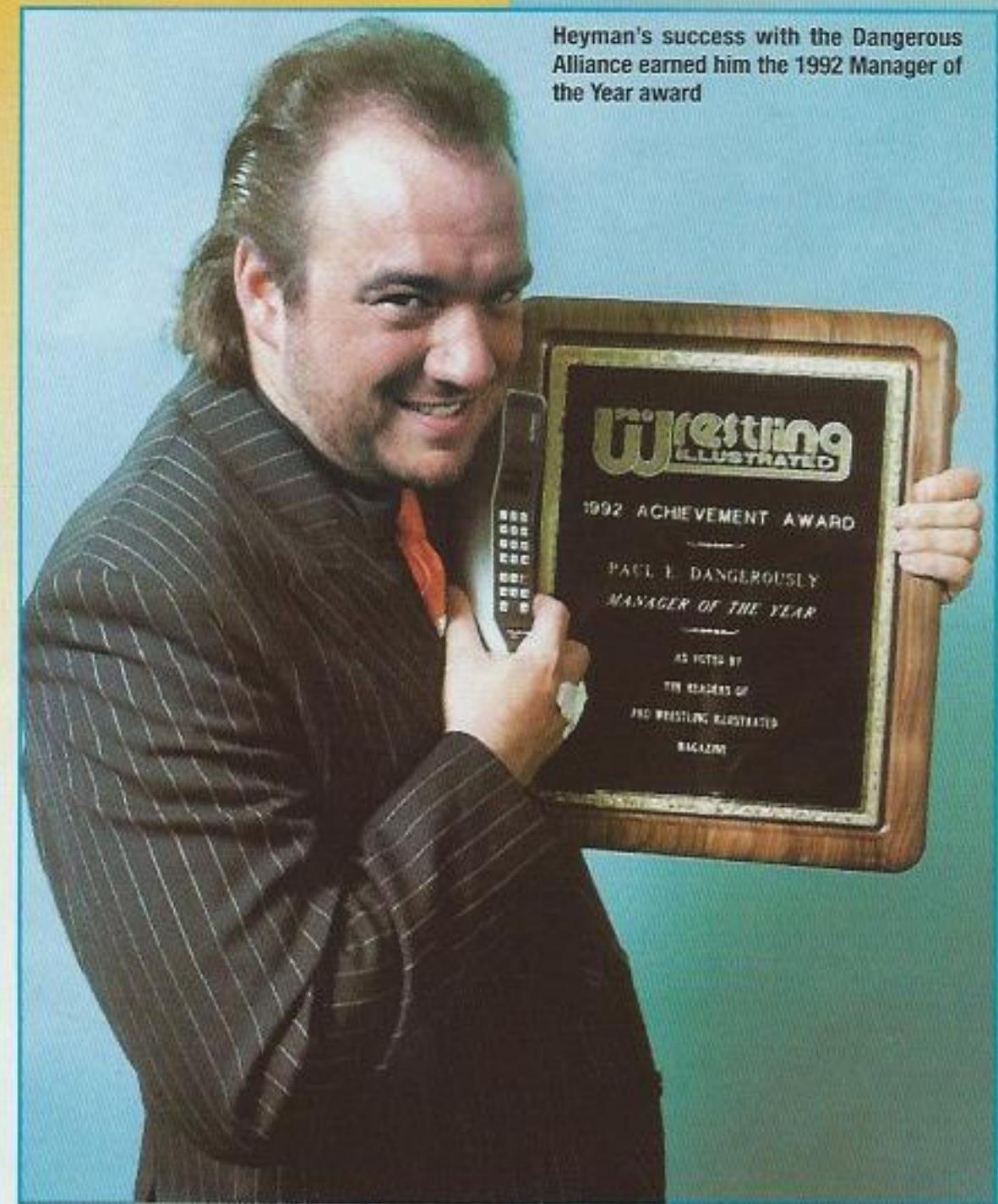
THE RISE AND FALL OF THE DANGEROUS ALLIANCE

While Paul E. Dangerously was despised by plenty of WCW fans and wrestlers in the early-'90s, he was also regarded as a brilliant wrestling mind and an innovator. So when he herded Rick Rude, Steve Austin, Arn Anderson, Larry Zbyzsko, Bobby Eaton, and Madusa into The Dangerous Alliance in 1992, only those on the fringes of the sport were surprised by the coup.

The talents and accomplishments of The Dangerous Alliance members spoke for themselves. Under Heyman's watch, Rude, who held several NWA territorial championships, would defeat Sting for the WCW U.S. title. Austin would enjoy two WCW TV title reigns. Anderson would win the WCW World tag title with Eaton, while Madusa and Zbyzsko served the group in a variety of capacities.

As the manager and mastermind of The Dangerous Alliance, Heyman's main duties were to keep his wrestlers in line for various title shots, and to keep six very accomplished and egotistical wrestlers working for the good of the group. But even the brilliant Heyman could not sustain the unity for long. As with any collection of great talent, the individuals proved unable to suppress their personal ambitions so that the team might prosper.

The first signs of tension occurred at Wrestle War on May 17, 1992, when the group booted Zbyzsko following a blunder that cost The Dangerous Alliance a War Games match vs. Sting, Rick Steamboat, Barry Windham, Dustin Rhodes, and Nikita Koloff. After Zbyzsko's ouster, Rude and Madusa left, while Eaton and Anderson sought an alliance with Michael Hayes. Soon, Heyman would leave WCW follow-



Heyman's success with the Dangerous Alliance earned him the 1992 Manager of the Year award

ing a contract dispute and The Dangerous Alliance was disbanded.

But, just because a new Heyman-led version of the group has yet to emerge doesn't mean Heyman has forgotten what his stable accomplished, or how he drove them to such tremendous achievements.

"The credit for any success The Dangerous Alliance has ever had belongs to me," said Heyman, who was only 27 when he formed the group. "And the responsibility for any failures belong to me as well. My track record speaks for itself, and I don't back away from it, because I've had the guts to reach for heights that so many can only hope to fall from. You know, I didn't choose the name Paul E. Dangerously because it was cool. That name was a reflection of my mind, abilities, and capabilities, and I am still the most dangerous man in sports-entertainment today. And no TV executive, wrestler, or billionaire can stop me this time around!"

—Frank Krewda

on Raw, observers say nothing short of making a Dangerous Alliance-style splash will satisfy him.

"I know Heyman for a long time, and I know he's up to something," said WWE commentator Jerry Lawler, who has clashed with Heyman several times in the past. "Before anybody ever heard the name 'Dangerous Alliance,' I was fighting off Heyman's thugs. And the way he's acting now is like *déjà vu*."

Lawler's suspicions are driven by recent comments attributed to Heyman by backstage observers at recent WWE events. Though he's stopped short of directly approaching any WWE wrestlers, Heyman is said to have remarked openly about how much he'd like to manage WWE heavyweight champion CM Punk, Dolph Ziggler, Randy Orton, and others.

And while Heyman doesn't deny having expressed an interest in managing once again, he asserts that his motives are business-related, not whimsical.

"Any one who thinks I'm on a nos-



When Lou E. Dangerously started mimicking Heyman and tried to form The New Dangerous Alliance in ECW during the late-'90s, neither Heyman nor the fans went for it. Heyman feels the time to relaunch The Dangerous Alliance in WWE couldn't be better.

talgia trip is performing a very shoddy psychoanalysis of me," Heyman said. "First of all, me and Brock are already a dangerous alliance. But when I see CM Punk, the best wrestler in the world, being continually underappreciated by management; when I see Randy Orton being more concerned with putting smiles on people's faces than winning titles, when I see a future main-eventer—Dolph Ziggler—on the mid-card instead of headlining WrestleMania, I see how easy it would be to expand my dangerous alliance with all the young talent in need of my most unique services."

No question, Heyman possesses the bona fides to resurrect the manager role or the relevance of factions in WWE. That there are no full-time managers (aside from Vickie Guerrero) or stables in WWE

these days only seems to bolster his critics' stance that managers and factions have become passé, and that Heyman is overestimating his potential value to WWE.

"Give me a break," Lawler moaned. "Doesn't he realize that managers are as yesterday as that mobile phone he used to carry around? Besides, the powers-that-be in WWE know their history. They saw what Heyman did in the AWA, WCW, and in ECW. They'll never let him accumulate that much influence and power again, trust me."

Lawler might be right. It can be argued that the "classic" manager's role has become unnecessary. These days, it seems wrestlers need little more than a pretty girl in their corner to captivate fans. And with more and more wrestlers perfecting their promo skills on the indy level and through

social media, fewer and fewer need a manager to do their speaking for them.

Heyman, though, remains convinced that he could perform a vital role in today's WWE. "I won't insult your intelligence by displaying false modesty," Heyman said. "I am the best evaluator of talent in combat sports, period. Not even Vince McMahon can match me. Twenty-two out of past 25 main-event attractions over the past two decades got to the top because of my involvement. If I didn't sign a talent, I developed him, and if I didn't develop him, I drafted him. Hell, I took a band of cast-offs and revolutionized the business with ECW. Nobody can tell me WWE wouldn't like me to do the same thing for them!"

And even if they didn't, would that stop him? □

THE BIG SHOW

Call Him A Stooge ... Call Him A Sellout ...
But You Can't Call Him Wrong!

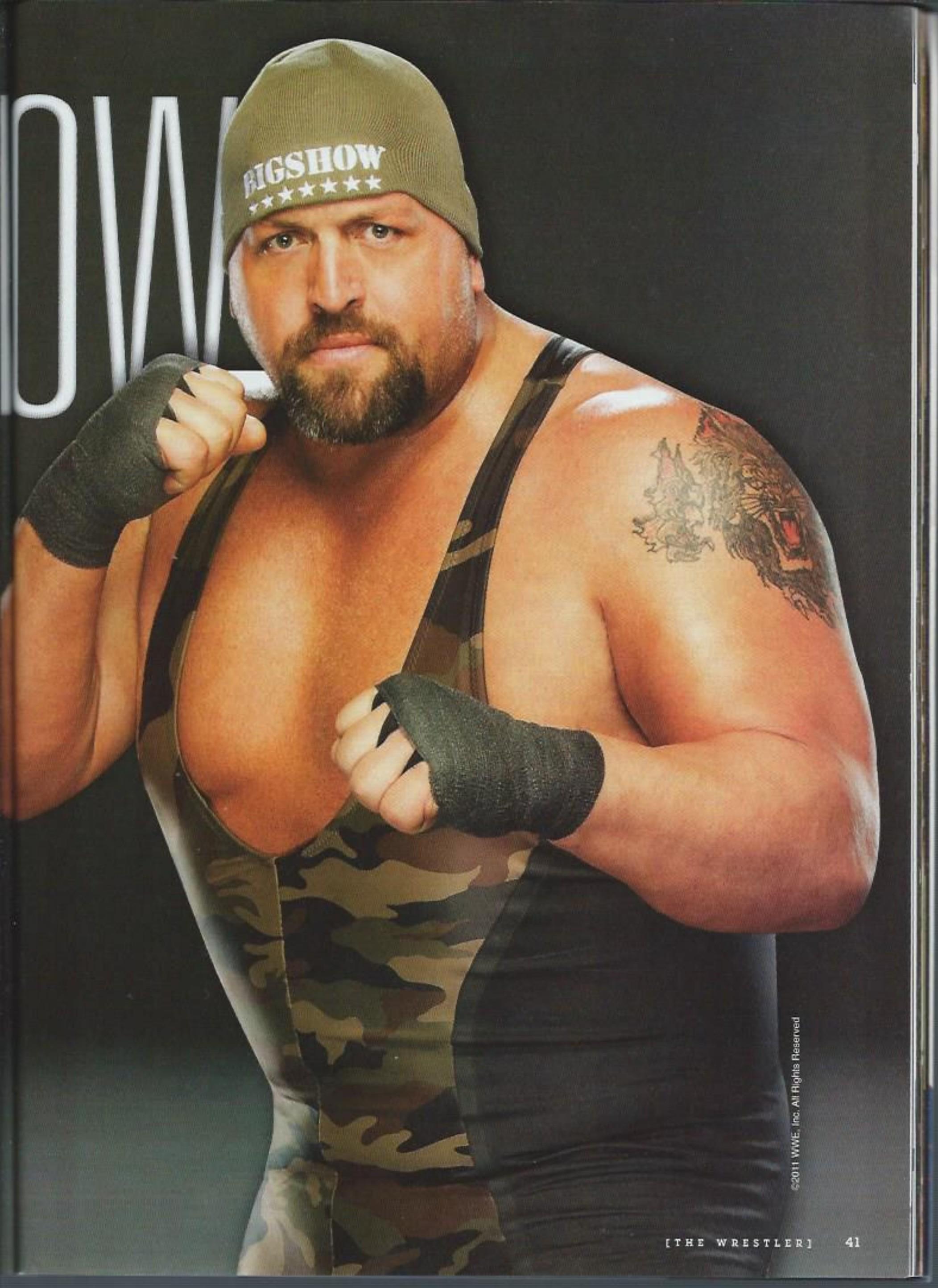
INDEED, WWE FANS WERE LEFT WITH A BAD TASTE IN THEIR MOUTHS AFTER THE BIG SHOW ALIGNED HIMSELF WITH JOHN LAURINAITIS THIS SPRING, BUT THAT WAS ONLY BECAUSE EVERY REASON SHOW GAVE FOR SELLING OUT TO "BIG JOHNNY" WAS VALID

BY FRANK KREWDA

IF IT SEEMS that criticism stings just a little bit more when it's accurate or justified, that's because it does. When facts prevent us from dismissing criticism as mere opinion, responding harshly is our natural instinct.

The Big Show understands this all too well, which is why he couldn't wait to unleash his vitriol on John Cena and the WWE Universe after linking up with John Laurinaitis in May.

Show made the mistake of mimicking Laurinaitis' voice on *Raw* in early-May, which led to the former Raw GM firing Show in an embarrassingly emotional segment on live TV. As the "World's Largest Athlete" blubbered in the ring, the fans in attendance expressed very little remorse or indignation. There were no tweets or Facebook posts blasting "Big Johnny's" shoddy treatment of The Big Show, and WWE was not flooded with e-mails from outraged fans. Even Show's longtime ally, John Cena, opted to clown around with Laurinaitis later in the program, rather than take



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WWE fans were aghast when The Big Show joined forces with John Laurinaitis, but in light of the way Show was been disrespected, he's earned to right to follow whichever career path he chooses.

him to task over what he did to The Big Show earlier in the broadcast.

So The Big Show waited ... and waited ... and never received any support from the fans or his WWE co-workers. Finally, when it seemed certain that everybody was going to simply accept his firing, "Big Johnny" shoved an ironclad contract with a fat signing bonus under Show's nose, and the big man signed on the dotted line, despite the fact that it was Laurinaitis, himself, who initiated this chain of events. A week after being so thoroughly humiliated by his new benefactor, Show attacked Cena on *Raw*.

Fighting on Laurinaitis' behalf elicited the kind of outrage Show felt WWE

fans should have aimed at Laurinaitis the previous week, and he wasted no time in explaining how he could join forces with the very man who took his job away.

"I was on my knees in the middle of the ring, literally begging for my job, and what happened? Not one wrestler even attempted to help me," Show reasoned. "Brodus Clay came out and did a dance routine. John Cena came out and cracked some jokes. The fans? No good-bye chants, not even a boo. And after all the sacrifices I made over the years to entertain them. After losing my job, I had to think about my family. Why would I care about what the fans thought? They haven't cared about me for 12 years ...

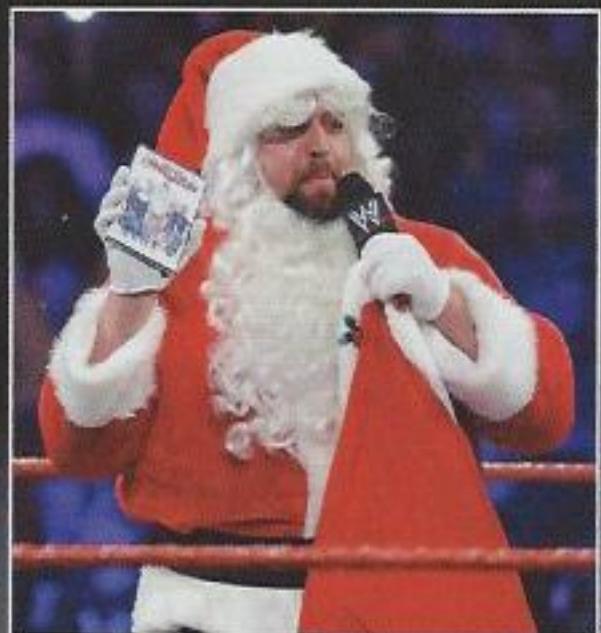
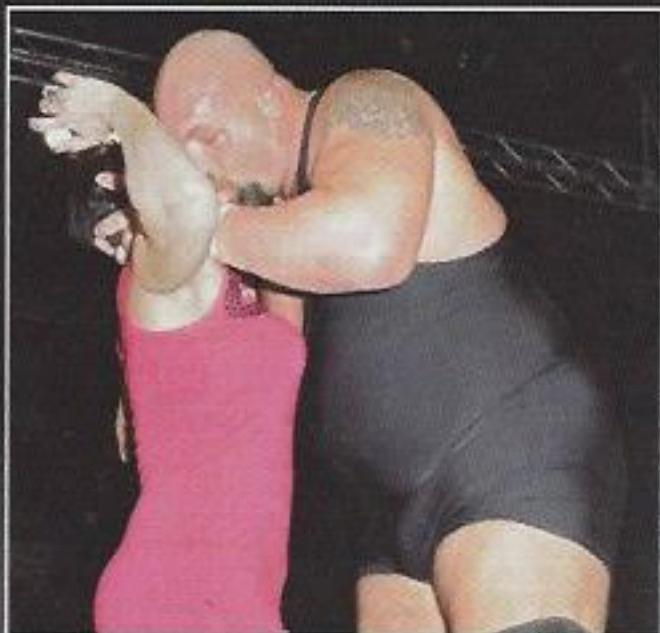
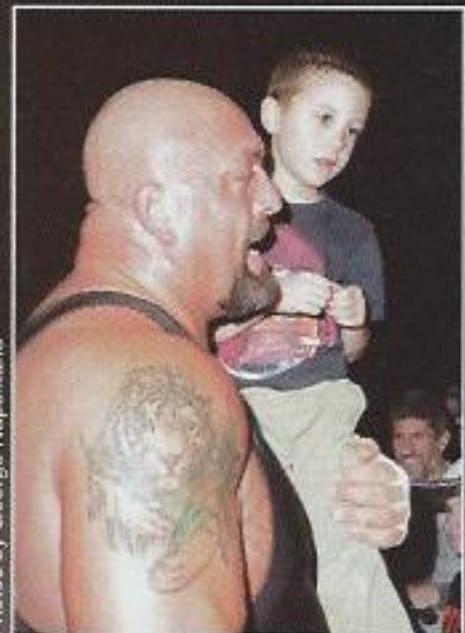
and neither did Cena, apparently. So I didn't think twice when John [Laurinaitis] made his offer."

Though it might not be popular to admit it right now, The Big Show was justified with joining Laurinaitis. That he put his wrestling potential on the back burner all these years so that he could put smiles on the fans' faces is irrefutable. His victory over Intercontinental champion Cody Rhodes at WrestleMania 28 may have made him the first wrestler in company history to win all of the promotion's titles, but Show's role as entertainer surely prevented him from being a thoroughly dominant wrestler.

Need somebody to imitate Rakishi or Hulk Hogan? "Show, you're up!" Need a sideshow at WrestleMania? "Hey Show, how's a sumo match with Akebono or boxing match with Floyd Mayweather Jr. grab ya?" "Win or lose, Show, always give 'em a smile."

Entertaining stuff, for sure, but were The Big Show allowed to remain true to himself rather than serve as WWE's resident dancing bear, he might have become the most dominant WWE wrestler since Andre the Giant, and therein lies the justification for Show's actions.

On the other hand, as Show readily admits, he made the calculated business decision to be an "entertainer" throughout his career. When the WWE fans and wrestlers sat on their hands while Lau-



Photos by George Napolitano

Whether it's been by greeting fans personally (left), planting a kiss on Vicki Guerrero (middle), or dressing up as Santa Clause at Christmas (right), Show selflessly put the fans ahead of his own ambitions over the years. Things might have turned out differently in WWE had the fans reciprocated the consideration when Show was fired in early-May.

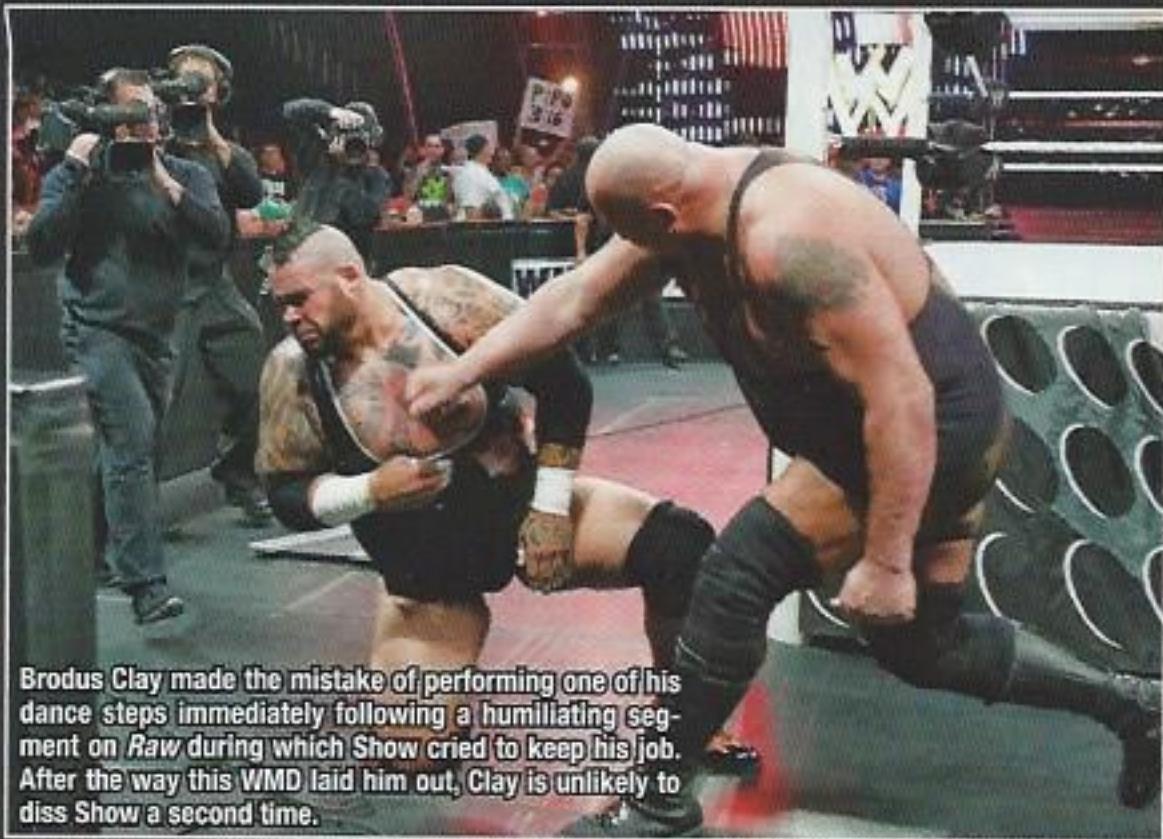
Laurinaitis humiliated him on Raw, though. Show finally realized that he'd made the wrong decision. Clearly, if the fans cared at all about Show, they would have registered at least some discontent with his firing. But they didn't.

Their silence was a slap in the face to a man who cast aside his professional ambitions for years to keep them laughing. After the disrespect he was shown in May, The Big Show would have been a fool—not to mention a negligent family man—to refuse Laurinaitis' offer. When he says the fans don't care about him, he is correct. Their apathy about his firing proved it. Therefore, nobody can knock The Big Show for doing what he sees best for his career. Finally, he has what he's wanted since joining WWE in 1999: financial security and the freedom to wrestle like a seven-foot, 441-pound giant should—without the pressure of catering to fans, who apparently don't appreciate him. Clearly, it is illogical to fault Show for what he's done.

However, logic is no consolation to Cena, Clay, Vince McMahon, R-Truth, Alex Riley, and Kofi Kingston who have all felt the unvarnished power and fury of The Big Show's recent rampages. To date, only Cena has gained a measure of revenge by defeating Show at No Way Out pay-per-view in June, which led to Laurinaitis being fired from WWE as per match stipulation. But even with Laurinaitis out of the picture, Cena still has an agitated and motivated giant to contend with.

"I can't believe things got to this point with Show," Cena said. "But I think it's nuts that a seven-foot giant would expect me to fight his battles for him. Look, if I held a grudge against every wrestler that didn't help me when I needed it, I'd have heat with half the locker room. Show needs to get over it."

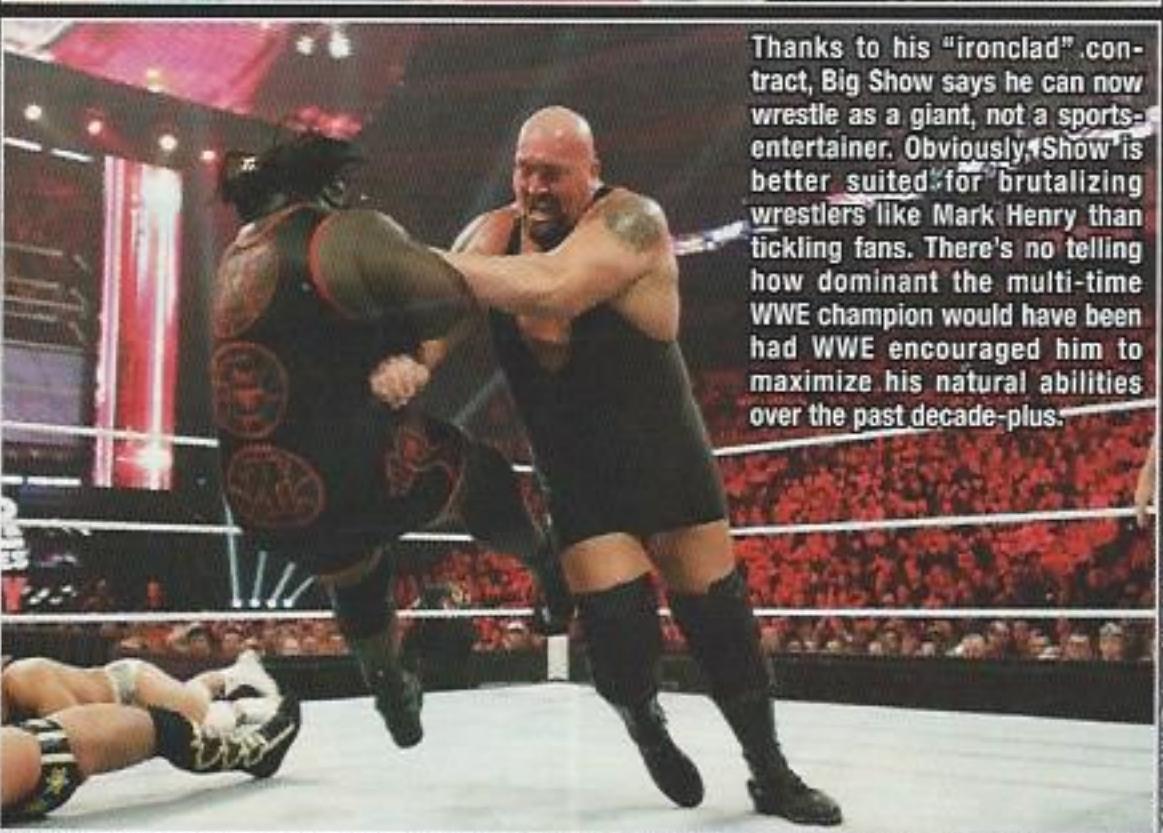
If by "get over it," Cena is implying that The Big Show needs to start taking matters into his own hands even more frequently, he's courting danger. Though Cena defeated Show at No Way Out, the trail of busted bodies already left in Show's wake suggests WWE is on the brink of a very violent shakeup. And when he starts laying waste to WWE in earnest, neither the fans nor Cena will have the right to complain, because The Big Show was right all along. □



Brodus Clay made the mistake of performing one of his dance steps immediately following a humiliating segment on Raw during which Show cried to keep his job. After the way this WMD laid him out, Clay is unlikely to diss Show a second time.



John Cena scrambles for cover after Show drops Mr. McMahon with a big right hand on Raw. With seemingly irreconcilable differences between them, future clashes between Cena and Show are inevitable.



Thanks to his "ironclad" contract, Big Show says he can now wrestle as a giant, not a sports-entertainer. Obviously, Show is better suited for brutalizing wrestlers like Mark Henry than tickling fans. There's no telling how dominant the multi-time WWE champion would have been had WWE encouraged him to maximize his natural abilities over the past decade-plus.

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THE WRESTLING ANALYST

EDDIE EDWARDS

Size:	6', 214
Years Pro:	10
"PWI 500" Listings:	2006: 498 2009: 92 2010: 37 2011: 9
Titles:	ROH heavyweight ROH tag team ROH TV NECW tag team (4 times) NECW Iron 8 championship (2 times) MWF TV FCP championship ACW junior heavyweight 2CW tag team TRP heavyweight
PWI Awards:	None

THE NUMBERS

OFFENSE (9.0): Edwards' offense is not flashy but very effective, mainly because Eddie wisely does not try to exceed his limitations. Edwards takes advantage of his natural agility and strength and does very well using an assortment of high-impact moves like suplexes, cutters, and stunners, which he augments with several submission holds and the occasional aerial maneuver.

DEFENSE (9.0): The root of Edwards' defense is his conservative offensive approach. He rarely over-commits to a maneuver, which always leaves him in proper position to escape or counter his opponents' moves. Eddie's measured pace may grow tiresome to some fans over the course of a longer match, but this methodical style has served him well.

CONDITIONING (9.5): It is rare to see Edwards tire even in longer bouts, and many of his matches turn into marathons exactly because of his tremendous conditioning and stamina.

POWER (8.5): One look at Edwards' physique will tell you he won't make a living by out-muscling true power merchants like Michael Elgin. However, Edwards possesses the kind of strength that adds jolting punch to his strikes, extra snap to his

Photo by Scott Finkelstein



Edwards is versatile enough to brawl or trade blows with any wrestler in ROH, but is at his best when he's on the mat or chain wrestling against other skilled grapplers, such as Shelton Benjamin.

splexes, and deadly torque on his submission holds. Edwards' strength is suited perfectly for his wrestling style.

SPEED (9.0): Edwards doesn't have the kind of speed that enables him to snap off a string of lucha maneuvers a la Sin Cara. However, few wrestlers are faster in transition than Edwards, whose athleticism and balance help him move from the mat to a standing position and back to the mat in the blink of an eye.

ABILITY TO ABSORB PUNISHMENT (10.0):

Edwards' ability to persevere through pain is the stuff of legend. He has wrestled while concussed and after suffering broken bones in the ring. Whether he wins or loses, nobody is going to batter Edwards to the point of quitting. That gives him a tremendous psychological advantage against opponents who may get frustrated by his durability, although such toughness could come back to haunt him later in his career.

INTANGIBLES (7.5): ROH fans and wrestlers alike respect Edwards, but his vanilla personality and workmanlike demeanor don't encourage frenzied, fanatical support. Perhaps Edwards feels his status as ROH's first triple-crown champion speaks for itself. Regardless, Eddie lacks bearing and has no aura. At times it seems unyielding confidence in himself and his abilities is the only intangible Edwards draws upon.



Most wrestlers would be toast following a Doomsday Device from The Briscoe Brothers, but not Edwards, whose "Die Hard" nickname fits him perfectly. Eddie may not cut a very intimidating figure in the ring, but few wrestlers are more resilient.

THE ANALYSIS

STRENGTHS: Eddie's technical ability and core wrestling skills are second to none, as are his will to win and his physical and mental toughness. Edwards is a proven commodity in ROH, and fans appreciate his fighting spirit, despite the reserved manner in which he carries himself.

WEAKNESSES: If Edwards were wrestling in the 1960s or '70s instead of 2012, his all-business style would be considered an asset, not a liability. But as we all know, today's wrestlers must be able to whip fans into a frenzy with what they say as much as they can with what they do. In a promotion that features several talented, mid-sized wrestlers who can shine on the mat, Edwards fails to set himself apart. A fundamental lack of marketability is his biggest weakness.

FUTURE: In the past, "Die Hard" was always a sure bet to contend for the ROH heavyweight, TV, or tag team titles. But that's no longer a given. His recent association with Adam Cole and a feud with Mike Bennett suggest that while he's only 27, he is willing to take on something of a veteran's role in helping groom ROH's younger talent. If Eddie wants more for himself, though, a jump to TNA or WWE is not out of the question. □

OFFICIAL RATINGS

TOP 10

- 1 SHEAMUS**
280, Dublin, Ireland
(3) WWE World champion
- 2 CM PUNK**
222, Chicago, IL
(1) WWE heavyweight champion
- 3 BOBBY ROODE**
240, New York, NY
(2) TNA World champion
- 4 DANIEL BRYAN**
(1) 190, Aberdeen, WA
(4) No. 1 contender WWE heavyweight title
- 5 ALBERTO DEL RIO**
(0) 240, San Luis Potosí, Mexico
No. 1 contender WWE World title
- 6 JAMES STORM**
235, Leipers Fork, TN
(-) No. 1 contender TNA World title
- 7 CHRISTIAN**
(-) 225, Toronto, ON
WWE Intercontinental champion
- 8 DOLPH ZIGGLER**
221, Hollywood, FL
(-) No. 2 contender WWE World title
- 9 KEVIN STEEN**
230, Marienville, QC
(-) Ring of Honor heavyweight champion
- 10 JUN AKIYAMA**
240, Osaka, Japan
(-) AJPW Triple Crown champion



Photo by Koichi Yoshizawa

JUN AKIYAMA

TAG TEAMS

- 1 CHRISTOPHER DANIELS & KAZARIAN**
Combined weight: 439 pounds
(-) TNA World tag team champions
- 2 RHETT TITUS & KENNY KING**
Combined weight: 433 pounds
(-) ROH tag team champions
- 3 KOFI KINGSTON & R-TRUTH**
Combined weight: 432 pounds
(3) WWE tag team champions
- 4 KURT ANGLE & AJ STYLES**
Combined weight: 455 pounds
(-) No. 1 contenders TNA tag team title
- 5 LEAKEE & MIKE DALTON**
Combined weight: 447 pounds
(-) FCW tag team champions
- 6 JUN AKIYAMA & AKITOSHI SAITO**
Combined weight: 510 pounds
(-) GHC tag team champions
- 7 JON DAVIS & KORY CHAVIS**
Combined weight: 449 pounds
(9) MWA tag team champions
- 8 MANABU SOYA & TAKAO OMORI**
Combined weight: 460 pounds
(10) AJPW Unified tag team champions
- 9 CHARLIE HAAS & SHELTON BENJAMIN**
Combined weight: 497 pounds
(7) No. 1 contenders ROH tag team title
- 10 TENZAN & SATOSHI KOJIMA**
Combined weight: 500 pounds
(6) No. 1 contenders IWGP tag team title

RAW

- WWE Champion:**
CM PUNK
(0) 222, Chicago, IL
- 1 DANIEL BRYAN**
(1) 190, Aberdeen, WA
 - 2 KANE**
(4) 322, Hart
 - 3 JOHN CENA**
(3) 251, West Newbury, MA
 - 4 THE BIG SHOW**
(-) 441, Tampa, FL
 - 5 TENSAI**
(10) 360, Japan
 - 6 SANTINO MARELLA**
(8) 237, Calabria, Italy
 - 7 KOFI KINGSTON**
(8) 221, Ghana, West Africa
 - 8 JACK SWAGGER**
(9) 263, Perry, OK
 - 9 BRODUS CLAY**
(-) 375, Planet Funk
 - 10 THE Miz**
(7) 231, Cleveland, OH

SMACKDOWN

- World Champion:**
SHEAMUS
(0) 280, Dublin, Ireland
- 1 ALBERTO DEL RIO**
(1) 240, San Luis Potosí, Mexico
 - 2 CHRISTIAN**
(-) 225, Toronto, ON
 - 3 DOLPH ZIGGLER**
(-) 221, Hollywood, FL
 - 4 CODY RHODES**
(2) 223, Marietta, GA
 - 5 RYBACK**
(10) 291, College Station, TX
 - 6 GREAT KHALI**
(8) 347, Punjab, India
 - 7 SIN CARA**
(-) 180, Mexico City, Mexico
 - 8 Hunico**
(7) 205, El Paso, TX
 - 9 JINDER MAHAL**
(8) 222, Punjab, India
 - 10 BRAY WYATT**
(-) 300, Brooksville, FL

TNA

- World Champion:**
BOBBY ROODE
(0) 240, New York, NY
- 1 JAMES STORM**
(-) 235, Leipers Fork, TN
 - 2 MR. ANDERSON**
(-) 238, Green Bay, WI
 - 3 JEFF HARDY**
(2) 225, Cameron, NC
 - 4 KURT ANGLE**
(5) 240, Pittsburgh, PA
 - 5 AJ STYLES**
(-) 215, Gainesville, GA
 - 6 DEVON**
(0) 280, New York, NY
 - 7 AUSTIN ARIES**
(3) 210, Minneapolis, MN
 - 8 ROB VAN DAM**
(7) 230, Battle Creek, MI
 - 9 SAMOA JOE**
(7) 280, American Samoa
 - 10 MAGNUS**
(-) 240, King's Lynn, England

RING OF HONOR

- Champion:**
KEVIN STEEN
(1) 238, Marienville, QC
- 1 DAVEY RICHARDS**
(0) 208, Othello, WA
 - 2 RODERICK STRONG**
(3) 215, Tampa, FL
 - 3 EDDIE EDWARDS**
(4) 214, Boston, MA
 - 4 MICHAEL ELGIN**
(7) 265, Toronto, ON
 - 5 MIKE BENNETT**
(6) 225, Carter, MA
 - 6 JAY LETHAL**
(8) 225, Elizabeth, NJ
 - 7 TOMMASO CIAMPA**
(5) 199, Boston, MA
 - 8 KYLE O'REILLY**
(10) 195, Cape Breton, NS
 - 9 ADAM COLE**
(2) 190, Panama City, FL
 - 10 HOMICIDE**
(-) 205, Brooklyn, NY

Top 10 and tag team ratings are based on won-lost records for the past month, quality of opposition, and inherent skill of each wrestler or team. These ratings are compiled by the magazine's editorial board. All other ratings are based on the official current positions of challengers to the top title in each category; certain titleholders receive an automatic spot in the ratings. The number in parentheses indicates a wrestler's position in that category last issue; (—) indicates that the wrestler was not rated in that category last issue while (C) indicates the wrestler was champion in that category last issue. Note: In an effort to keep the ratings as up-to-date as possible, these pages are often the last to be sent to the printer. Thus, the ratings may reflect changes not reflected in the remainder of the issue.

FOR PERIOD ENDED JUNE 28, 2012

COMBAT ZONE WRESTLING: Champion—MASADA; 1—Sami Callihan; 2—Drake Younger; 3—Greg Excellent; 4—A.R. Fox; 5—Samuray Del Sol; 6—Danny Havoc; 7—Dave Crist; 8—Adam Cole; 9—Alex Colon; 10—Matt Tremont.

DRAGON GATE USA: Champion—Johnny Gargano; 1—Akira Tozawa; 2—Chuck Taylor; 3—Ricochet; 4—Low-Ki; 5—PAC; 6—El Generico; 7—Masaaki Mochizuki; 8—BxB Hulk; 9—CIMA; 10—Sabu.

EAST COAST WRESTLING ASSOCIATION: Champion—Papadon; 1—Kekoa the Flyin' Hawaiian; 2—Breaker Morant; 3—Chris Wylde; 4—AHTU; 5—Bandido Jr.; 6—Johnny Silver; 7—Bobby Shields; 8—Josh Daniels; 9—Cole Callaway; 10—Corey Blaze.

ELITE PRO WRESTLING ALLIANCE: Champion—Jake Davis; 1—Luke Gallows; 2—The Patriot; 3—Bodie Williams; 4—Chris Cline; 5—Griffen; 6—Vince Vega; 7—Scott Titus; 8—Robbie Paige; 9—Brandon Scott; 10—Sean Hudson.

EVOLVE: Champion—Vacant; 1—Chuck Taylor; 2—Johnny Gargano; 3—Fit Finlay; 4—Low-Ki; 5—Jigsaw; 6—Bobby Fish; 7—Sami Callihan; 8—Jon Davis; 9—A.R. Fox; 10—El Generico.

FLORIDA CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Bo Dallas; 1—Richie Steamboat; 2—Kassius Ohno; 3—Dean Ambrose; 4—Leo Kruger; 5—Bray Wyatt; 6—Bo Dallas; 7—Antonio Cesaro; 8—Seth Rollins; 9—Erick Rowan; 10—Big E Langston.

MARYLAND CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Nui Tofiga; 1—Christian York; 2—Ryan McBride; 3—Ronnie Zukko; 4—Tyler Hilton; 5—Josh Daniels; 6—Hoss Hagood; 7—Buck Chyld; 8—Ricky Reyes; 9—Jimmy Cicero; 10—Adam Flash.

OHIO VALLEY WRESTLING: Champion—Rob Terry; 1—Jamin Olivencia; 2—Mohamad Ali Vaez; 3—Johnny Spade; 4—Cliff Compton; 5—Christopher Silvio; 6—Michael Hayes; 7—Raul LaMotta; 8—Shiloh Jonze; 9—Ted McNaler; 10—Tony Gunn.

NORTHEAST WRESTLING: Champion—Brian Anthony; 1—Matt Taven; 2—Jerry Lawler; 3—Luke Robinson; 4—Bobby Lashley; 5—Tommaso Ciampa; 6—Cedric Alexander; 7—Adam Page; 8—Robbie E; 9—Jim Duggan; 10—Vader.

PLATINUM CHAMPIONSHIP WRESTLING: Champion—Mason; 1—The Jagged Edge; 2—Jacob Ashworth; 3—Brian Blaze; 4—Devlin Valek; 5—Najasim; 6—Geter; 7—Marko Polo; 8—Mr. Eric; 9—Tommy Daniels; 10—Corey Hollis.

SHOWTIME ALL-STAR WRESTLING: Champion—Vordell Walker; 1—Luke Gallows; 2—Matt Bentley; 3—Micah Taylor; 4—Cassidy Riley; 5—Jesse Emerson; 6—Jeremiah Plunkett; 7—Allen Shephard; 8—Eric Wayne; 9—Jon Michael Worthington; 10—Ryan Mitchell.

WORLD ALL-PRO WRESTLING: Champion—Vacant; 1—Ryan Mitchell; 2—Bull Dozer; 3—Chris Taylor; 4—Atomic Dog; 5—Jasin Karloff; 6—Spanish Fly; 7—Jason Kross; 8—Kane D.; 9—John Poe; 10—Bandido Jr.

NWA

Champion:

COLT CABANA

(C) 233, Chicago, IL

1—ADAM PEARCE

(1) 248, San Diego, CA

2—SCORPIO SKY

(3) 190, Big Bear, CA

3—SHAUN TEMPERS

(4) 232, Cumbe, GA

4—KAHAGAS

(2) 200, Parts Unknown

6—SHAUN RICKER

(6) 229, Los Angeles, CA

8—DAMIEN WAYNE

(8) 237, Hampton, VA

5—CHANCE PROPHET

(5) 225, Sacramento, CA

9—WILLIE MACK

(9) 245, St. Louis, MO

7—JEREMY WYATT

(7) 210, Kansas City, MO

10—TEREX

(—) 440, Parts Unknown

JAPAN

1—JUN AKIYAMA

(1) 240, Osaka, Japan

AJPW Triple Crown champion

2—HIROSHI TANAHASHI

(—) 230, Gifu, Japan

IWGP heavyweight champion

3—TAKESHI MORISHIMA

(3) 290, Tokyo, Japan

GHC heavyweight champion

4—HIROOKI GOTO

(4) 230, Kanagawa, Japan

5—AKEBONO

(5) 516, Watanabe, HI

6—PRINCE DEVITT

(6) 178, Wicklow, Ireland

7—TESTSUYA NAITO

(7) 220, Tokyo, Japan

8—YOSHINOBU KANAMARU

(8) 190, Tokyo, Japan

9—TAKUYA SUGAWARA

(9) 210, Akita, Japan

10—SUWAMA

(—) 260, Kanagawa, Japan

MEXICO

1—EL TERRIBLE

(2) 230, Nuevo Leon, Mexico

CMIL Champion

2—L.A. PARK

(3) 221, Monterrey, Mexico

3—EL HIJO DEL PERRO

AGUAYO

(4) 170, Mexico City, Mexico

4—HECTOR GARZA

(5) 210, Monterrey, Mexico

5—TEXANO JR.

(6) 220, Mexico City, Mexico

6—DR. WAGNER JR.

(7) 216, Torreón, Mexico

7—DRAGON ROJO JR.

(10) 190, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

8—AVERNO

(8) 174, Mexico City, Mexico

9—BLUE PANTHER JR.

(9) 220, Gomez Palacio, Mexico

10—LA SOMBRA

(—) 180, Durango, Mexico

WOMEN

1—LAYLA

(2) 120, Miami, FL

WWE Divas champion

2—MISS TESSMACHER

(—) 115, Houston, TX

TNA Knockouts champion

3—BETH PHOENIX

(4) 155, Buffalo, NY

4—GAIL KIM

(1) 125, Tampa, FL

5—JESSICKA HAVOK

(5) 175, Massillon, OH

6—SARAYA KNIGHT

(7) 126, Norwich, England

7—MARTI BELLE

(—) 125, Manhattan, NY

8—BRITTANY FORCE

(7) 130, Johnstown, PA

9—KACEE CARLISLE

(8) 155, San Francisco, CA

10—EPIPHANY

(—) 159, Cleveland, OH